

## I Ching/ The Book of Changes

The deeply intuitive new series of drawings by Theresa Chong are simply presented but labor-intensive and intricately depicted, using color pencil on 12" x 12" Shikibu Gampi, a strong, lustrous, translucent paper and Tosa Konshi, a hand-dyed indigo paper, both from Japan. It will eventually number 64 works, corresponding to the number of hexagrams in the I Ching, or the Book of Changes, one of the oldest of the great classical texts of ancient China. A book of divination that is still in use, the I Ching encompasses a system of philosophical thought that is integral to Chinese culture and to Taoism and based on the dynamic balancing of opposing forces, the belief in continuity, and the acceptance of change, concepts that Chong has long emphasized in her practice. The titles for the present series will be taken from the I Ching's hexagrams—one for each work—CH'IEN (Force, the Creative Power) and FU (Returning), for example—each hexagram in the book accompanied by a poetically cryptic explication that adds another layer of reference.

Their tonalities are muted, greys that appear to be delicately steeped in other shades (as in SHENG, HSU), and a range of reds, greyish blues and greens (in TA KUO, FU, TING) that are so flickered by marks that they elude being named as a fixed, describable color. Often edged by bands, top and bottom, as if framed, the drawings are reminiscent of Chinese album leaves, a popular format for Sung dynasty painters with the same intimate presence. While choosing a square for the series, a figure usually at equilibrium, Chong deliberately, brilliantly disrupts that repose through the irregular, improvised dispersal of her strokes. The balance she wants is more precarious, verging on instability, on dissolution, poised between opposing systems of expressiveness and order. Opposition, like that advocated in the I Ching, characterizes much of her work, its willful intensity apparent upon closer viewing, as mark after mark lightly, stubbornly hammers against formlessness and silence, leaving an existential trail of presence, linked to the hand of the artist.

The images seem traditionally Eastern—Chinese, Japanese, Korean—in motif and presence, even if the patterns are almost wholly abstract, as might be expected from an artist whose roots are Korean. However, Chong's interest in the I Ching, in chance combined with predetermined limits for her projects is not so straightforward and came through John Cage, in a bit of a twist: East raised in West meets East through West. Cage has been, and remains, one of the great influences in her life, ever since she came to New York in the 1990s, happening upon him in a fortuitous encounter that had tremendous reverberations for her, one that was, perhaps, both coincidental and destined. And Cage, as is well known, had a deep admiration and affinity for Eastern philosophies and art.

Chong's beginnings were in music; she was a gifted cellist but chose to be an artist instead. I suspect she felt compelled to pursue something that was less expected, less familiar and therefore more challenging, an act of resistance as well as of desire in her urgent, youthful search for self-affirmation and self-determination. But music

remains a great force in her life and the rhythms of her imagery are instinctively musical, the marks often recalling musical notations although perhaps more overtly so in other, earlier works. To me, the rhythm of her mark making in the I Ching series is similar to drawing a bow across the cello's strings in countless movements of the hand, the arm, the body, sound translated into drawing, for the eye rather than the ear that, if heard, would be staccato, atonal, pressing.

These recent drawings were based on rubbings from Chinese stone markers. Acquired years ago, she only incorporated the rubbings' imagery into her work now. It was not an unusual interval for Chong since she says that she likes to wait in order to see things in a different light, from a different point of view, her process organic, evolving slowly, folding time into it as a conscious, signifying element. Time is also represented by the accumulation of her finely inscribed marks, hundreds and hundreds of them like the ticking of the clock, and by the blank areas of the tightly interwoven composition, which indicate the eroded sections of the stone markers. These are the places that most intrigued her, she said, since whatever was once there is gone, scoured away by time. She likened them in some ways to ukiyo-e, images of the floating world, a genre of Japanese painting that thrived in the Edo period (17th – 19th c.), its theme that of reveling in beauty and pleasure while it is possible, an enjoyment made bittersweet by the knowledge that it is fleeting.

In addition to everything else, the drawings are exquisitely beautiful. They have been worked on tirelessly, the short, taut strokes like that found in the meticulous delineations of classical Chinese representational paintings. Here, however, the strokes depict the abstract—although the picture might be read as aerial landscapes, maps or whatever else the viewer imagines—creating a luminously textured, complex surface that suggests craquelure patterns in some areas, that is soft and hard, rough and refined, with a sophistication that is the artist's hallmark. And the paper, an exemplary Asian support, drawn on both sides, is thin enough that recto and verso are more or less visible at the same time, a complete presentation.

It would be too simplistic, too categorical and unrealistic, to think that because Chong is of hyphenated identity, that this body of work is somehow ordained, that the Korean or Asian side has precedence over nearly a lifetime spent in the United States, immersed in the ways and means of Western European and American contemporary art. For her, as for everyone, identities are simultaneous and consciousness is multiple, their externalizations complicated and unpredictable. Therefore, if Chong makes drawings that at this moment look Asian, it has not been a direct journey. Instead, it has been circuitous, filled with detours and canny explorations of things and ideas accepted and rejected, the trajectory inconclusive, to arrive at this particular moment and this compelling, singular body of work—which is not a return to her roots but a going forward toward somewhere she has not yet been.

Lilly Wei  
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