

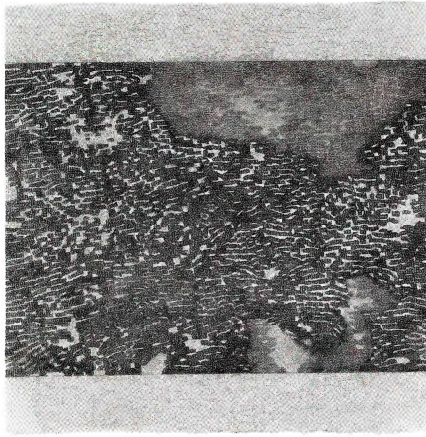
*Strange,
to see all that was one time related, fluttering now
loosely in space. And it's difficult to be dead.
There's all that catching up to do before one feels
just a little eternity.*

—Rainer Maria Rilke, from the *First Duino Elegy*, translated by William Gass

Theresa Chong's recent works on paper, titled after Rilke's celebrated poetic cycle known as the *Duino Elegies*, are profoundly stark in comparison to the artist's earlier bodies of work, all of which, although never less than elegant and disciplined, are layered with conceptual and procedural extravagance. Simple and direct, the *Elegies* conceal nothing. Each begins as a delicate sheet of rice paper roughly twelve inches square but unique in edge characteristics and exact dimensions. These are carefully painted with black gouache on both sides, with mineral glitter often mixed in, then dried, ironed flat, and ruled with gold or copper wax pencil into evenly calibrated grids. Inside the cells of the grid occasional oval markings, hand drawn in faintly visible silver in no discernible pattern, are confined like wounded parentheses. The uneven density and glitter of the matte background, like a thick black cloud pierced with the faint sparkle of occluded stars, combines with the cryptic, irregular ovals—more in some drawings, few or none in others—to create an atmosphere of hushed mystery, like a Joseph Cornell box with nothing, or almost nothing, in it.

As with each successive body of Chong's work, the *Elegies* reverse the tactics of what went immediately before, yet in doing so carry forward the artist's underlying subject: the unresolvable wobble between procedure and gesture, discipline and freedom, language and chaos, authorship and chance. A brief synopsis of Chong's zigs and zags is therefore essential to understanding where, so to speak, the *Elegies* are coming from.

Working backward, one arrives first at the *I Ching* drawings (2014). Nothing could be farther from

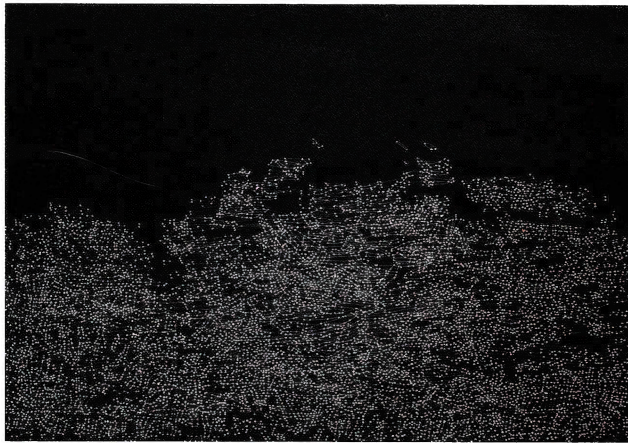


LIN (Approaching), 2014, Colored pencil on Shikibu Gampi, 12 x 12 inches

the spare geometry of the *Elegies* than this extensive series of improvisational abstractions on paper, each titled after one of the 64 divinatory *I Ching* hexagrams. Maximally hatched and set off along the top and bottom with wide bands approximating the silk mountings of Asian ink paintings, they methodically, even forcefully, evoke landscape and vegetation, but at uncertain scale. In each drawing, articulated boundaries peel back in shallow layers like colonies of lichen or perhaps rocky outcrops in forests; some shapes seem to hover like clouds reflected in bogs. The artist was raised in Fairbanks, Alaska, her family having moved there from Korea when she was nine years old, and it is tempting to imagine this profusion of highly individuated drawings as reformulating the endless Alaskan wilderness as Chong must have seen it from small planes flying overhead.

Yet after more than a hundred of these drawings, Chong came to realize that the interior contours most closely resemble—and to an eerie degree—something she had tried not to see when working on a grid-based series more than a dozen years earlier. More about this apparent subliminal imprinting, which bears on the *Elegies* as well as the *I Ching* landscapes, when we arrive at the end of our backward survey.

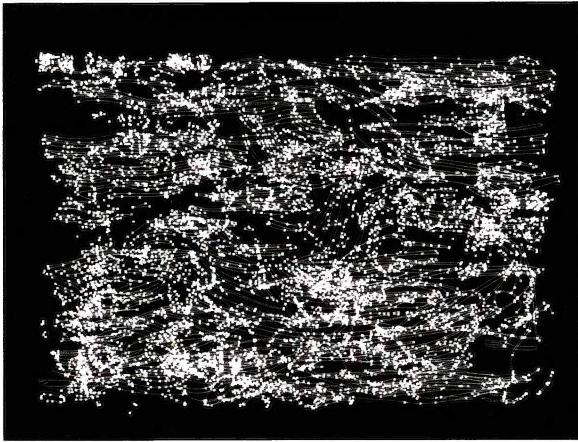
The *Dots and Lines* are the next most previous works (2002-2010), large drawings that compress intersecting templates into exquisite traces which, as John Yau writes in an exhibition essay, “combine structure and randomness to such a seamless degree that the most astute viewer cannot tell where one begins and the other ends.” Again, the *I Ching* drawings that followed could not be farther from



Nini (Porcupine), 2009, Colored pencil and gouache on indigo Japanese paper, 32 x 46 inches

the conceptual approach and rigorous limits on mark-making that Chong adopted for the *Dots and Lines*. These works began on the computer, where Chong scanned electrical diagrams, musical scores, action painting brushstrokes, as well as Pop versions of these (i.e., Roy Lichtenstein's *Brushstrokes*), architectural plans, Korean dress patterns and other high-calorie source material, which she digitally transformed into linear skeletons. These were printed as transparencies and collated randomly on a lightbox, where large sheets of handmade rice paper, some plain, some dark indigo, were placed so that the lines below would show through. Wherever lines from the transparencies intersected, Chong stenciled onto the surface of the paper a small square (in white or black; hollow or filled, depending) simulating an Adobe Illustrator vector "path," which can be manipulated at will— in ironic contrast to the squares stenciled on the delicate paper, which cannot be erased. Lastly, the resulting scatter of squares, hundreds, if not thousands of them, were linked by supple gouache lines that gently crisscross like sheaves of fiberoptic cable. The process was generally repeated on the backside of the translucent white sheets, creating shadowy layers of complication. As if to underscore the Cage-ian aesthetics in play, Chong made an accompanying video for her 2007 exhibition of these works at Danese Gallery in New York, provocatively entitled *4'33"*.

In this four-minute-and-thirty-three-second-long video, Chong animates the dot-and-line motif of the drawings to a sound score that includes a cello playing a training etude, of the sort that Chong had practiced many hours a day while intensively studying the instrument from girlhood. No, Chong's *4'33"* is not silent (nor, for that matter, is John Cage's inescapable composition of that title, since

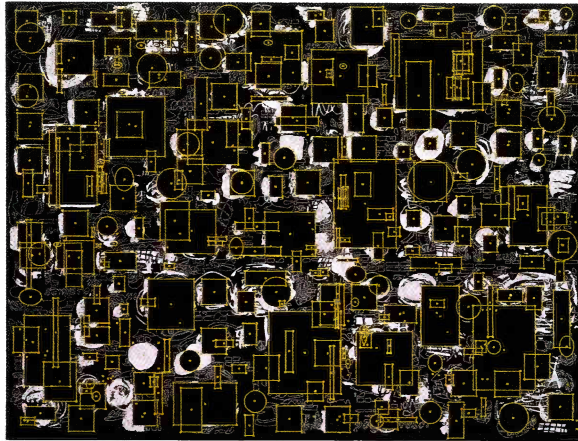


4' 33", 2007, Still image from a black and white video animation

chance sounds during a performance are, by artistic fiat, integral). Chong knows better than to treat Cage sanctimoniously, and she applies his interventions against compositional control in her own way. Indeed, her interest in Cage is longstanding; during graduate school in New York this young immigrant from the extreme provinces found herself assisting downtown impresarios Phill Niblock and Petr Kotik. She met Cage at several of their events, having already been radicalized, like generations of artists before and since, by his book "Silence."ⁱⁱ Yet Chong, whose son is now pursuing a professional career as a classical cellist, is fully invested in the Great Composer tradition which avant-garde modernism would debunk. She has been a rigorous, committed practitioner, no mere listener; Bach's music in particular remains in her ears and fingers, lodged in the deepest part of her being—which is precisely what makes Cage's anti-music music so liberating, so necessary.

Prior to the *Dots and Lines*, Chong made a series of large paintings with silkscreens derived from some of the same materials later used in her lightbox drawings. In these untitled oils from 2001, the computer widgets, dress patterns and so on are tweaked into crisp, all-over tangles which resemble, for that matter, some of Cage's captivating graphical scores. When impeccably silkscreened with vibrating colors in offset layers, the lines jump off the saturated surface, creating a luxurious optical buzz.

With one more backward zag we end our survey at Chong's *Popper Etudes* (1999)ⁱⁱⁱ, where we again encounter the cello music from her video 4'33", here transformed into a hieroglyphic code of Chong's

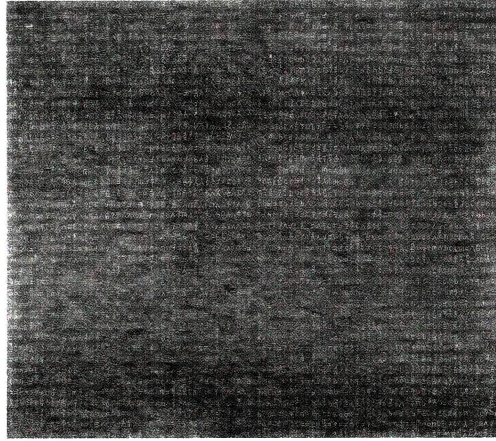


Untitled #164, 2001, Oil on linen, 60 x 80 inches

devising. Reenacting the unyielding diligence demanded by her cello practice, Chong carved hardwood blocks with tiny symbols conveying all the notes, as well as bowings and fingerings, of one of David Popper's¹⁶ notoriously difficult exercises. The symbols are set in a strict grid that was inspired by engraved Chinese text stones, an early form of on-demand printing that remained practical for millennia. Inking the wooden blocks, Chong printed them in various combinations to make a mysterious body of unique prints that range from the ethereal to the darkly phantasmal. Some of these works look like tablets left by a vanished civilization; others might be inscrutable instructions from the future manifesting, in Nancy Princenthal's evocative phrase, as "fading computer screens on which dreamy bits of data drift like falling rain."¹⁷

Around this time, Chong obtained some rare books of Chinese rubbings, so that she could study the way bristling columns of pictographs (she cannot read Chinese) condense into geometric fact. But many of the stones had worn away and broken off, leaving softly jagged potholes or islands of black—and it is these distinctive shapes, rubbed, as it were, into her subconscious, that Chong's improvisations in the *I Ching* drawings converge upon. The *Elegies*, too, seem to bear the imprint of these ancient stones, their informational grids reformulated as minimalist strategy. Between Lao Tzu and LeWitt, the *Elegies* seem to say, is but the blink of an eye.

Chong's *4'33"* video is not silent and her *I Ching* drawings involve no chance operations; nor should we expect her *Duino Elegies* to conform to narrow expectations according to their title. Rilke's bleak,



Popper Etudes, #136, 1999, Oil on rice paper, 20 ½ x 23 ¼ inches

but ecstatic visions of a world beyond the living, however, do tend to impose themselves on the sparse mood of Chong's abstractions, which, as we have seen, renounce the layered intricacy and labor-intensiveness of her previous work. And since the referent poems are open to interpretation, one might even indulge in synergistic cherry-picking, especially among Rilke's more metaphysical passages. Here, at the beginning of the Eighth Elegy, Rilke considers the limitations of human perception, and tries to put into words what we can't see:

*All other creatures look into the open,
With their whole eyes. Our eyes, instead, go round the other way,
Setting snares and traps on every path to freedom.*

[...]

*We've never had that sort of pure space before us,
into which flowers endlessly open—no, not for a single day—
there's always the interpreted world, and even our
abstract realms reflect a repeated yes or no:
never that pure unmonitored element one breathes,
naturally knows, and never craves.*

This translation can be found in the late novelist/philosopher William Gass's 1999 collection "Reading Rilke,"^{vi} in which Gass reflected on the inadequacies of his version of the Duino Elegies along with fourteen previously published English translations—a number which may now be as high as twenty, confirming Rilke's rarified status. While Gass the ironist scoffs at the saintly cult surrounding Rilke, he yields to the poet's self-mythology as "an agent of transfiguration whose sole function was the almost magical movement of matter into mind." As such, Rilke's poetry—along with his luminous letters about art and art's mission—serves as a mirror image to the artist's aspiration: transforming mind into matter. Indeed, Rilke has played a role comparable to Cage in the mental lives of artists, the two of them defining a polarity that has charged Theresa Chong's work in particular. Both Rilke and Cage teach that art is transcendence: the one by relentless withdrawal into the self, the other by thinking the self away.

David Brody

2021

i John Yau, *Theresa Chong's Etudes*, Danese Gallery 2007

ii John Cage, *Silence*, 1961, Wesleyan University Press

iii Chong's impressive oeuvre extends back further, but she considers the Popper Etudes to be her first truly personal body of work.

iv David Popper, Bohemian cellist and composer, 1843-1913

v Nancy Princenthal, *Editions* 2004, Lower East Side Printshop, New York, NY. I should point out that Princenthal was writing about a different group of Chong's prints.

vi William Gass, *Reading Rilke: Reflections on the Problems of Translation*, Knopf, 1999, all Rilke quotations from this book.