

# THERESA CHONG

## **"Theresa Chong's Etudes" by John Yau (essay for exhibition catalog/ Danese Gallery, November, 2007)**

An etude, we might recall is a short musical composition for a solo instrument intended to develop a particular technique or to display the performer's skill, but often is played solely for its artistic merit. As a definition, it seems applicable to Theresa Chong's drawings and recent animations of a number of reasons, one of which is her background in classical music. Chong was born in Seoul, Korea, and raised in America. She studied music from a young age and became a highly respected classical cellist. She can systematically break down a complex score into its distinct notes, and then put them back together as music. She brings her rigorous training and analytical intelligence to her art, which is rooted in inventive processes that can only be described as meticulous.

With the exceptions of Oskar Fischinger (1900-1967) and John Cage (1912-1992), the relationship between music and art has for the most part been one-sided, with painters trying to find ways to make their work emulate the essential abstractness of music. The great 19th century writer and aesthete, Walter Pater, asserted that all art aspires to the condition of music. He was, of course thinking about a

language that needs no justification for being. For any painters, this meant pure abstraction. Chong, however, inverts Pater's dictum, and proposes that all music aspires to the condition of art.

In her recent work, which consists of large drawings and two black-and white video animations, 4'33" and 33", Chong uses lines and dots-the DNA of drawing-to achieve a complex abstract topology that evokes night sky musical scores, and the experience of time passing. In the titles of the videos, Chong is clearly alluding to John Cage's famous (or in the minds's of some, infamous) piano piece, 4'33", in which the performer sits at the piano for the time marked out in the musical score, but never touches the keys. At the beginning of 33", we see a field of black dots and lines on a white ground, These dots, singly or in aggregate, spread through the field, of black dots and lines on a white ground. These dots, singly or in aggregate, spread through the field, shifting and scattering as one hears a sound like a stiff wire brush rasping back and forth against metal. Although mechanically produced, this sound also evokes the rhythm of breathing, an association that I think Chong intended. The brevity of the piece is poignant, as it underscores how often we are unaware of ourselves in time.

The lengthier animation 4' 33" consist of two parts, an opening section in which white dots and eventually clusters

of dots, suddenly become visible against a black ground, their appearance synchronized to percussive bursts that are reminiscent of both the click of castanets and the clatter of hail falling on a tin roof - the entire section gathering force like a thunderstorm. In this second part, when the screen becomes an opaque concentration of dots, a cello begins playing an etude, Opus 73 by David Popper, and the dots softly and slowly begin to fall, like snow. Once again there is unity of sound and image, the connection rhythmic. In associating the percussive with accumulation, and the cello's rhythmic lilt with loss, Chong evokes our bittersweet passage through time. Like the dots appearing, accumulating, and then falling, we live inside a reality that is both ordered and random, and we finally have no control over either.

Chong is able to choreograph drawing and music so that they are interlocking but yet independent, we hear and see without one superseding the other. More than becoming heightened aesthetic moments, we experience both the changing connections and discrepancies between looking and hearing, we become aware that our senses generally operate independently of each other, and that is we who elevate one over the other.

Made of dots and lines, Chong's drawings require another kind of attention. For all their methodical coolness, they

seem to fluctuate before our very eyes. Her complexly layered drawings are abstract systems that never settle into stasis or the systematic, rather, they combine structure and randomness to such a seamless degree that the most astute viewer cannot tell where one begins and the other ends. This is partly what brings our attention back to Chong's drawings, we keep thinking that we will be able to discern what holds them together. Like stars, they emit a light that is eerie and remote, haunting.

The dots both echo and work in counterpoint to the curving linear structure, which suggest movement in space, they fold into another kind of rhythm. In addition, they flatten out the spatiality evoked by the linear structure unfurling like musical scores. Chong's co-joining of clusters of dots and linear structures establish an abstract space in which structure and randomness, as well as the still and the dynamic, are linked. We keep thinking that if we look long enough we will actually begin to see the line and dots move. It's as if the drawing is an Aeolian harp sensitive to our gaze. At the same time, the intense simultaneity Chong achieves in her drawings reminds the viewer of the busyness of reality, how on all levels from the microscopic to the macroscopic, all is moving.

Chong's drawings and animations evoke ephemerality, the appearance and disappearance of things in time. This is both

a sturdiness and vulnerability to her work that evokes our own existence. And yet, for all of their consciousness of time passing, Chong's work never becomes a lamentation. For all of the affinities she might share with artists as different as Vija Clemins, Bruce Conner and Daniel Zeller, her work is not like anyone else's. They speak in their own language, one that is rooted in the simplest elements. Isn't this what we have wanted all along? Words, music, or art that takes us somewhere to a place that cannot be characterized by received language and outmoded conventions. This isn't about being avant grade, but about being fresh.