

Jying Tan: (De)part

Silent Intimations and The Dialectics of Space

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“Sometimes the house grows and spreads so that, in order to live in it, greater elasticity of daydreaming, a daydream that is less clearly outlined, are needed. ‘My house,’ writes Georges Spyridaki, ‘is diaphanous, but it is not of glass. It is more of the nature of vapour. Its walls contract and expand as I desire. At times, I draw them close about me like protective armor... But at others, I let the walls of my house blossom out in their own space, which is infinitely extensible.’”

The Poetics of Space, Gaston Bachelard, Beacon, 1969

If you had happened to pass by the ICA galleries at the basement sometime during March, you might have chanced upon Jying Tan’s discreet installation. In the delta-shaped space at the intersection where two galleries meet, a shelter had slowly been erected, unnoticed before. Occupying the entire area, the installation was made up of sheets of calico stitched together and it seemed unassuming enough from the outside. There had been several exhibitions in TriSpace before, which made use of the two walls and a glass window configuration. But this was not a work to be appreciated as an object or seen through the glass as an image. Shutting you out from looking from the outside, it was a work of interiors that silently beckoned you to enter. Once inside, you realise the countless pieces of calico were actually stitched together by human hair. These fine black filaments not only held the fabric together but seemed to be thriving and growing at the seams from the knots as well. In experiencing the installation as a sum of elements, materials and percepts, one could break it down to these parts in understanding the work:

The Triangle

The shape of the space is a triangle, it being the simplest of geometric forms. Yet this shape has its roots in ancient symbolism, representing the genitalia of the goddess for female divinity. As a downward pointing triangle, it is a symbol for water as it flows downwards. For similar reasons, it represents the grace of heaven and also the womb. TriSpace points away from us, the converging of two bodies of space in the centre. One could see it as a point of origin or the end. In architecture, it is a point of perspective that creates dimensions. Tan’s installation investigated the site as anthropomorphic space to explore the womb as the center of one’s world and to quote from Bachelard, “the first universe where one exists and that every dwelling has its beauty”.

Calico

Calico originated in [Kozhikode, India](#) (also known as Calicut where it got its name) during the 11th century and was brought to Europe through trade in the 17th Century. It is basically raw and unprocessed cotton, and is thinner, lighter and more delicate than canvas. It also has a weave that is less coarse. The textile is inexpensive and can be dyed, printed and used mostly for fashion or homemaking crafts like dresses, aprons, bags and quilts. In its untreated and un-dyed state, it is a

lighter shade of cream like canvas. In some Chinese customs, relatives of a deceased would wear unbleached calico garments at a ceremony to mark the end of mourning. Tan carefully considered this restraint and lack of adornment in the fabric not as a symbol of mourning but for its purity.

Hair

Hair marks a person, as clearly as speech, clothing and smell. A person's age, gender, status, sexual ability and desirability is defined by whether it is present or absent, restored or removed, abundant or scarce, long or short, bound or unbound. There have been instances of artists who have used hair in their art, from the sublime to the defiant. UK artists Mona Hatoum (of Palestinian origin) has shaped little spheres of hair with her own hands and scattered them on the floor like constellations for her installation, and Jordan Baseman incorporated the body part on a man and child's shirt. In Singapore, Suzann Victor used hair to create text in concentric circles that resounded with sexuality and taboo and Joseph Ng notoriously snipped off his pubic hair during a performance as a protest against police entrapment of homosexuals. Whether natural or forceful, they all involved the removal of hair from the body. Hair, in Tan's installation was used inconspicuously as material to thread through the pieces of calico together in a delicate craft. Innocuous on the outside and organic and seamier in the inside, one derives a form of intimacy from the material in this context. This brings us to the next part.

Intimacy

There are three kinds of intimacy to explore here. The first speaks of privacy and secrets like being in someone else's room. There is a level of trust from the other party to be comfortable with you being in his/her private space. One observes nuggets of information and how the other has dwelled in the space through articles like clothing, toiletries or an unmade bed. The second kind of intimacy is more fleeting when extended to transitional spaces like cars or elevators. A fragrance or someone's perfume can linger long enough for you to make associations with the person. If it happens often enough, it becomes familiarity. Intimacy could be traces left behind: a strand of hair from a loved one, someone's lipstick-stained coffee cup etc. The third kind involves a close association, a detailed knowledge or a deep understanding of a subject, like how certain food tastes just the way your parent used to make it as when you were a kid. Likewise, there is more intimacy in an imperfectly thrown ceramics mug from a potter's wheel, none in the cold mass produced plastic cup. This kind of intimacy works with memory and the senses and always involves things being handmade. Tan had collected not only her own hair, but also that of her mother and friend. She also collected extension hair from the salon. Then there was the intricate and time-consuming process of stitching threads of hair with calico and creating a womb-like structure out of them, bearing in mind that hair must not be easy to sew with. The relationships of these people are inextricably tied symbolically to the work. Though not necessarily distinct from each other, Tan's work negotiates between three kinds of intimacy: that of space, trace and memory of the body.

Displacement

Displacement has been a persistent theme in Tan's work for some time now. Her memories of shifting and re-adapting to different environments inform her work. She ponders and questions the anchor point in this ever-changing world. Displacement is about temporality, construction and notions of the home. Tan had built a similar installation for her BA degree graduation show at one of the larger ICA galleries. The difference was that the structure was not encapsulating and it was a

cube-like structure suspended a few feet off the ground. It was an object that the viewer could peek through the windows but could never get inside. Did she move, adapt and expand the structure to make it more immersive here? This shelter was a temporary protective space that the artist had built within the modern architecture of the campus to call her own. The construction here was somewhat nomadic, built like a tent of calico skins supported by PVC frames. The whole structure was foldable and collapsible, ready to be packed if need be. It was also a space within a space. I am reminded of the work of Korean artist Doh Ho Suh, who created a replica of his Korean home out of fabric in a New York gallery or Monika Sosnowska from Poland, who for the Venice Biennale, squashed a metal skeletal structure into the inner space of a building in which it mimicked.

Sensation

Calico, because unprocessed, can smell a little rank because of bits of vegetation in it. Now combine it with human hair and there is a repulsion depending on how one perceives the work. Hair that is shed or cut has a notion of rejection or being unwanted from the body. Like dust, fallen hair is traditionally thought of as excrement of the body and meant to be swept away and disposed off. Tan had subverted this notion by creating a tactile experience of hair and calico. Her methodology of craft translates into a tension of both beauty and revulsion for the viewer. Let me venture into another kind of sensation here – that of insulation. Like how the womb insulates the foetus, the fabric insulates the viewer from the outside world. The pale walls of the calico translate into a kind of silence, shutting the noise of modernity away, and perhaps the threads of hair are like whispers (of secrets?).

“There is nothing like silence to suggest a sense of unlimited space. Sounds lend colour to space, and confer a sort of sound body upon it. But absence of sound leaves it quite pure and, in the silence, we are seized with the sensation of something vast and deep and boundless.” (Bachelard)

Space

Finally we are back to where we first began, the walls seem to breathe with every stitch of hair and crumple at your feet, their folds elastic and continuing into infinity, an expansion or contraction of the universe. The social body does not recognise these walls, I feel mildly isolated, the social body diminishes, and my physical body takes over. I am much too tall here, the hairs brush against my head. Eight feet into the space and I’ve reached a cul-de-sac. Alas, one wishes there were more passages to navigate or rooms to disappear into, or at least for the opening that has led me inside to be closed so I don’t get distracted by outside forces. But no more. No one lives here, nothing happens. Visitors come, pause, they stay for a while and go. Exactly.

We often go about our lives in a state of distraction, how often do we stop to ponder at our spaces? Architecture absorbs us into the landscape while we go about our routines. Tan had created a pocket of space away from this. In this impressive modern architecture with their hard angular black walls, Tan had created a soft pocket of organic space for one to pause in or perhaps for “greater elasticity of daydreaming”. Built with approximately two thousand pieces of calico fabric held only by the strength of human hair. Silently lucid and understatedly feminine.