

Monochromatism

Works by Tan Teng Teng

By Usha Nathan

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Aspiring artist Tan Teng Teng, who completed her studies in fine arts at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) in 2007, will be having her first major solo exhibition of her new as well as early works at Mulan Gallery this December. We spoke to the artist to find out more about these works and her art practice.

Your earlier work was about turtles. Why did you choose this particular subject?

This series of works was called THE SURVIVAL SYNDROME. I chose to represent turtles. Textures in the bodies are very beautiful. Also, in the traditional Chinese painting style, artists do not commonly paint sea turtles. Not having a reference from these was something that appealed to me.

Until then, my interest was pretty direct – I just wanted to paint turtles. But when I was researching on the internet on the subject, I just chanced upon many pictures put up by environmental activists. There were many sea turtles with lumps of tumors in their faces and around their eyes all of which originated from sea pollution. I was saddened by it. I feel strongly about environmental issues, and I am also a vegetarian. To a certain extent, I want to speak up for the sea turtles and through my work help bring some awareness.

But apart from your message, these paintings are visually interesting. Tell us if you choose to keep them minimal and monochrome and why.

A few years ago when I was a student, I realised that colours tell people more than what you can with simple lines. It makes it easier to find out what's being shown. So I understood that if I took away the meanings that colour add, the work would get more interesting and challenging as well for me. At this point, I don't want to go back to using colour. I enjoy it this way; it is like how people may like black and white photographs.



THE SURVIVORS' ESCAPE, FROM HOME, Paint & Print # 1



THE SURVIVORS' ESCAPE, FROM HOME, Paint & Print # 3



THE SURVIVAL SYNDROME, Brush & Print # 3

Tell us more about the process of painting and how it evolved.

I paint a style of mixed media with paper and brush. How I paint is simply use a Styrofoam board and paint its smooth surface. I use the rice paper to print the picture painted. I rub the paint from the board onto the paper using my hands. It happened in my final year at NAFA when I was helping out on campus. There were foam boards that were being thrown away. I thought it was a waste so I brought it back to my studio and started using it this way. At first, I was just experimenting for fun. But when my lecturers at NAFA came across this, they said it looks like stone carving with Chinese calligraphy, but in terms of technique it is contemporary. So I worked on this technique for my final year, graduating work.

How about your new works? Are these also about turtles?

My newer works are inspired by pictures of coral reefs. It is continuing my interest in environmental issues, similar to how I started to paint turtles. They are semi-abstract. Even some of the paintings from the series on turtles had semi-abstract qualities. I think our memories can overlap; they don't remember singular things. So objects I paint don't have to be whole, they can be in pieces and melded together like images from the mind.

Do you paint with a definite final image in mind and how does the process work?

No, not really. The paintings are composites with print and brushwork. I have to come back to the brush almost always. The process itself is mostly random.

I must say I am curious, as a musician yourself do you listen to music while painting? How the two work?

Yes, I listen to this Chinese instrument because I feel I can always bring myself to a very quiet part of me when I listen to its sound. I can come very close to my mind, if you know what I mean. In ancient China this instrument was very commonly used by poets. It has a spiritual sound quality.



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