

CHEN Chu-Li Solo Exhibition: In the Making

Wu Yu-Chih

When did you first learn about Chen Chu-Li? Was it from the FIAT car paint design for TATO¹? Or was it from Green & Safe in Shanghai, the Farm Table Restaurant in Taipei, or the art installation at agnès b. for Very Fun Park? Or perhaps it was from the illustration book, *Moon Festival Mission of Superdog No.1*, or her fabric design for inBloom, or maybe it was from the clothes she designed for the Little Seed Collection? Maybe some of you even knew her from her earlier works, such as *Mucho gusto! España* or *Mapper*, which means just like me, you have been following this artist since the very beginning. The characters Chen creates are simple but vivid, and they are uniquely shaped. Some may even say her color applications are sometimes riskily unsaturated. The collages she makes showcase swiftly cohesive techniques that are frank and unpretentious. The shapes, colors, and techniques she applies result in highly distinctive and appealing works that are a bit playfully odd and unconventional.

Beyond the abovementioned, another feeling is emphasized by the works Chen creates, and it is something that is not lighthearted or sweet, and it surely isn't about showing off her skills; it is something that stems from a foundation that is solid and substantial. This comes from the sincerity and complexity observed in her works. She rarely uses computer imaging software to generate images, and before doing a layout, she would sometimes begin with collaging or printmaking. Mixing together different creative formats, tools, processes, media, colors, and techniques and taking on various self-challenging endeavors, the different elements she creates, such as the red nose, black eyeballs, green elbows, overlapping human figures, modes of transportation, and the worlds she constructs are richly multi-layered, and they are intensely "hands-on," which is something that has become increasingly rare nowadays. Therefore, the lines, shapes, and color blocks Chen creates can all be seen individually beyond the storyline, and they can be appreciated like precious gems. As we follow her on her increasingly more mature creative journey, we are not simply just following the works that she creates, but we are also gathering gems that we treasure in our hearts. These gems reflect the values that we cherish, which are persistence, simplicity, and self-demand.

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However, Chen Chu-Li did not stop there.

Beyond what we've flipped through, worn, and held in the past, Chen is shown in this exhibition in a different and richly multifaceted way, with her seen in leftover scraps from the production processes of her other illustration and design projects. The artist is showing us a new perspective to see these so-called leftovers, as she embarks on a journey of "re-finding" them, even though she refers to the artworks created from these scavenged treasures as "insignificant creations."

However, we can't simply use the philosophy of "the great use of uselessness" to explain these "insignificant creations." The reason is that this exhibition is not advocating an artist who is living a tranquil life by "working without a motive," but on the contrary, this exhibition is about to unveil in front of us an artist who is using leftover materials to engage in a sequence of battles that involves her art, her abilities, her everyday life, and reality.

In reconstructing those leftover materials, she begins by reevaluating the scraps of paper leftover from her work, assessing their shapes and colors, and seeing them as unconscious remains from design projects that she has consciously completed. In reconstructing the messages to be delivered, after the unconscious pieces are detached from the theme and the meaning of art, some of the remaining shapes, truncated pigments, and even the parts with paper remaining (e.g., the edges of paper) then take on an independent life, with brand-new messages thus created by the artist. In reconstructing creative techniques, the artist experiments with some basic techniques of rubbing, arranging, and trimming, and she even transforms her own abilities by combining existing methods with formats of new explorations. Applying her existing professional expertise, the artworks, *All of a sudden* and *Infinity*, are created using the quartet continuous pattern that is found in textiles. As for new explorations, the shapes and forms of the flat leftover materials inspired the artist to think about the possibility of three-dimensionality, so she studied ceramic art which then led to the small ceramic sculpture, *Playground*. Arrangements of lines found in printmaking also inspired her to explore the possibility of making three-dimensional prints, with techniques explored by working with the critical details of nail holes and marks left from joints. Moreover, the "readymades" that she works with extend beyond just leftover materials. She incorporates the matting paper that's used in printmaking, a necessary part of the printmaking process but typically not considered a work of art itself. Because of the artist's understanding of printmaking, the matting

paper is framed and declared a work of art, with what was unrecognized then becoming recognized.

Some may see this as an expression of reflexivity; however, perhaps the starting point lies in the artist's insistence on dissensus, from glimpsing to gazing, on all that she encounters. Therefore, this exhibition is not a casual, pleasant little creative idea; it is about subverting and fighting so that everything that has happened will not be discarded, and all trivialities can be highlighted.

This fight comes from the fact that the artist doesn't give in to convention. Each fragment is a unique moment that's encountered. Each fragment is a unique moment that has resulted from when time and the present version of yourself meet and encounter one another. The fight also comes largely from the artist having mastered a number of professional expertise but fears becoming outdated and longs to throw herself into the unknown, because to stumble when learning also brings excitement that comes from something that's new. This fight is also observed in the artist's use of "sensible configuration" to redefine herself; time and space; useful and useless; proficiency and improficiency; sense and sensibility; and even professionalism and everyday life. As suggested by the title of one of her artworks, *Construction*, this indifferent construction conveys a mental space that's been vigilantly and uncompromisingly built by the artist, whereby the freedom to resist convention is produced.

Please take time to see these artworks. The exhibition opens with *Components-1* and *Components-2*, with some pieces from the *Found Object* series also on view, showing how the artist sees the leftover materials as an integrated whole and also as a stand-alone entity. The artworks, *Dreams* and *Composition of dreams*, then follow, with the artist's sophisticated printmaking skills demonstrated, including how to stretch out thin and thick layers, work with overlapping imprints, and engage in a playful game with delicate and smooth details. Presented next is the prolific series, *Found object*, with a stark contrast created with intentional blank areas. A sculptural quality is created using the leftover materials, echoing with the artwork, *Playground*, that's presented in the front. In addition to ceramic art, a wide range of skills, including textiles and three-dimensional printmaking, are also applied to the leftover materials.

The exhibition concludes with *One night in the desert*, with a deeper meaning suggested by the piece. Prior to Chen's arrival in Spain for her residency, she stopped by Morocco to conduct field studies. She asked the Berber people who live in the

desert what do they do when they get lost in the desert. The Berbers answered, "Follow the sand dunes." "What about in the nighttime?" "Then just go to sleep. I'll know which way to go by daylight," replied the Berbers. All the leftover materials scattered from her illustrations and design projects are like sand dunes; the artist collects them and reshapes them, not only to resist what's defined by the norm, but she is also marking a spiritual direction for herself and for all of us, a direction that shines like a precious gem and cannot be covered by the sand of everyday routines and habits.