

Beyond Sight

Jacky Cheng's artworks are well known in the Broome community as well as further afield across Australia and overseas. Her signature use of layer upon layer of thin paper build contour-like into landforms and objects that simultaneously convey a rich Chinese-Malay heritage and a contemporary Kimberley landscape (both physical and political). Each layer is meticulously crafted through hours of minute and laborious hand paper cutting

A prolific artist for whom studio time is sacred, Cheng has refined her practice over the past 15 years. But more recently noticed some small and worrying changes; working long hours with white light reflecting off white paper became harder and harder and she often found herself feeling where the edge of cut line was instead of being able to see it. By the time she realised that she couldn't read street signs when driving, she was diagnosed with Acute Angle Closure Glaucoma.

While the diagnosis is not as serious as first feared (yes, sight will become more difficult in the coming years but total loss of vision may never be a reality) – its occurrence and the related anxieties have prompted this new performance work *Beyond Sight* to ask a pertinent and rather urgent question: how am I a visual artist if I can no longer see?

Is seeing necessary to make *visual* art? In the same way you could ask is listening essential to making sound and music? Is movement essential to creating dance works? And even more pressing the question for Cheng: if I can no longer see/hear/listen or move, am I still a dancer, musician or artist?

Over the week of Broome Fringe Festival Cheng breaks with tradition and invites you in to her studio to witness her art-making practice as she physically grapples with some of these ideas. Laying aside the precise and painstakingly accurate x-acto blades and bone-folders for the week, she will create a new work on paper by expanding her methods to absurd proportions using a drawing tool as large as her body and a canvas that fills the entire room.

Her 'tool' for creating the drawing is a 1.6 meter bamboo brush she has constructed and the 'paper' on which she draws is actually sheets from Chinese calendars, the printed dates and days turned face down and laminated together to create a ghostly ground on which to work. If you can read Chinese characters you would know that the calendar also gives information about the zodiac; helping with mundane daily decisions such as recommending an auspicious time to book a dentist appointment, or warn it may be a bad idea to call a relative.

Whilst I think Cheng views much of these suggestions with the semi-engaged scepticism that I myself employ with my own horoscope. I also appreciate that when we suffer misfortune or illness, we are often left searching for meaning or at least ways of framing troubles that befall us. Rituals of superstition build strength over time and through much layering. Cheng's use of the calendar also speaks of time passing, her days of vision as she knows it are literally numbered, calendar pages inevitably creating a palimpsest which obscures her sight.

The act of drawing using her whole body takes the intimate personal experience of losing of one of her key senses and makes it her entire physical world. Cheng invites us (her audience) to undergo this with her, witness her challenge, feel the frustration and difficulty she embodies and perhaps even participate in this act of endurance.

I expect to see moments of humour, tragedy and grace.

But like many feats of endurance and indeed ritual, there are sure to emerge moments of transcendence. How do we find other ways to help us describe the world when one sense fails us? Exploring alternate possibilities enables different and diverse ways of understanding but also enriches our often-lacking modes of communication. This new work both articulates a problem and offers an answer in that *Beyond Sight*, as a live performance work, is a new mode of making and being for Cheng. I can't wait to go and spend some time with her in her brave new studio.

Text by Tanya Lee
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Soundtrack titled Arteles Salon Oliveros Sonic Meditation XIV 7:30mins; instigated and recorded by Ken Steen, 20 July 2018, Arteles Creative Centre, Finland.

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