

## MEASURING THE INFINITE

BY SUSIE WONG | IMAGES COURTESY THE PRIVATE MUSEUM

YE SHU FANG's art is always intimate – she looks around her and shares a personal splendour of things. *The Loss Index: Perishables and Other Miscellanea* (The Private Museum, April 5 to June 2) brings into fore childhood dreams/memory, layered with our learnt way of asking about things which, however, remains fluid and infinite.



**SUSIE WONG:** May we begin our email conversation about *The Loss Index* with the following? There were two key themes which I picked up in the catalogue. One is that of the 'everyday' from Daniel Teo, owner of the gallery, and two, you as a 'resistant artist' from Seng Yu Jin<sup>1</sup> who wrote the article. Both propose that art is political. Before we get into that, can we start simply from the beginning, from the subjective. Of the everyday, and I suppose this means the materials that interest you in your art making like agar agar, can you tell us perhaps of the beginnings of your aspirations for such choices (your thoughts about, the context of your surroundings, family, home, work and self)?

**YE SHU FANG:** I shall start by sharing what I can identify as the start of this track of 'everyday', which is connected to the 'resistant artist'.

When embarking on my MA studies, I decided to impose on myself, certain parameters within which to make art: use found objects, use recognisable familiar materials, use basic skills. Don't acquire any new 'art skills', try not to require special equipment or workshop space, try not to visit art supply shops or buy art materials.

I wanted to know what I have to say as an artist, if I didn't have a workshop, specialised skills or art materials. And so I looked around me. I looked at basic skills like drawing, boiling water, even breathing. And I found materials – like a roll of rubber sheet in the carpark and unused agar-agar strips at home. That led to the rubber strip and agar-agar experiments in 1998/99.

The ideas and the questions I had then, were not new or original, of course. When I started cooking and using agar-agar, the process and the medium added to/complicated the meaning of my works as well.

I was quite glad to let things get complicated over the years.





With some works, I isolated the medium and filtered the possibilities to present a direct meaning; for example, in the works 'chocolate as painting' or 'agar-agar as sculpture'. With other works, I removed myself completely from the 'making', complicating the questions of 'who is the artist' and 'how is this art'; for example with 'Project Recipe Box' and Project Black Forest Cake'.

Having said all this, I wonder if I am more an ambivalent artist than a resistant artist.

If you read Tania's<sup>2</sup> article in Timeout (I can email it to you if you don't have it), I shared a little on the personal sentimental memories of the agar-agar. In Lindy's<sup>3</sup> interview for The Happiness Index<sup>4</sup>, I shared personal motivations for the new series of drawings in 2011. I will email you some thoughts I have on the 2013 set of drawings.

My work is neither politically or socially driven; I am neither persuaded by the importance of art or the need for art. I am not convinced by the theories and concepts of art, nor the authenticity of art histories and artists' histories. Is this resistance or ambivalence?

**About your doubts of art history or artists' histories, this is a pretty much general outlook today, in becoming aware of the western-centric nature of art history as a method, that we here in this part of the world situationally, may choose to bear the task of unlearning.**

**It is akin to looking back on our past, and what we had learnt through our system of education, the Peters and Janes of learn-to-read English books (Ladybird), or the Enid Blytons. They evoke a nostalgic longing, and yet, become questionable learning today, as what constitutes a colonial condition. What does it mean for you in the use of the 'The Adventures of Mooty' in some of your drawings (Exercise in Memory) in as much as it is standard local publication?**

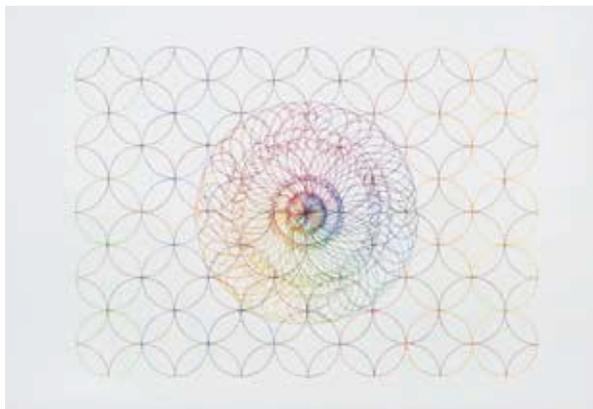
**You had layered this current body of works with a number of instruments of measurements or those that impose regularity, uniformity, precision: moulds, the tape measure, the French curves. rather than propose 'time' predominantly as the measurement index which your earlier ephemeral practices entail, you are now choosing space, depth, volume, shape, as encounters. (Incidentally these are forms of measurements that one would describe as analog today – again another element that suggests what is past).**

**These elements in your work is a happenstance of objective research, and as artist you are deferring your 'hand' in more ways than merely 'removing' yourself from the 'making' – you are doing so by tracing the predetermined shapes and ready illustrations an organising these into these pictures.**

**How does this match with what you had alluded to as 'personal sentimental memories' (of agar agar), and 'personal motivations'? Is the personal subjugated, and if so, or if not, why?**

With the books from my childhood, instead of the obvious western-centric social cultural constructs and conflicts; I was more interested in how the illustrations would have influenced the development of my sense of aesthetics. (I am not referring to the notion that the illustrations made me think that fair-skin, blue-eyed maidens were the ideal beauty...) I am referring to formal elements of line, colour, composition in such illustrations; I wanted to suppose that these illustrations (rather than the art movements or 'isms' learned in art school) are core to how I would now compose and arrange visual elements in a drawing, painting or an installation.

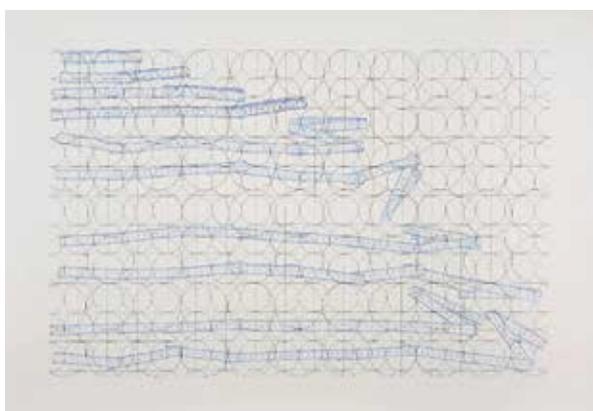
By reproducing the composition in Kwan Shan Mei's illustrations (for the 'Bala on the Moon', 'Minah and her house' series rather than 'The adventures of Mooty' series) and laying and overlaying the illustrations with grids, circles and templates, I am employing the tools,



**Exercises in French Curves (I), 2013, 75 x 52 cms, watercolour on paper**



**Exercises in Memory (I), 2013, 105 x 73 cms, watercolour on paper (NB: Images referenced from Primary Pilot Project Materials, Ministry of Education, Singapore; illustrations by Kwan Shan Mei; first published in 1973)**



**Exercises in Length, 2013, 105 x 75 cms, watercolour on paper**



**Exercises in Shape (III), 2013, 100 x 70 cms, watercolour on paper**

instruments and frameworks that I have learnt to use as an artist; to measure, standardise and contain what I had intuitively loved as a child.

I don't really understand what you mean by '(I am) now choosing space, depth, volume, shape, as encounters', could you explain further?

What you described in the next paragraph about 'deferring my hand' is something I have not thought of. If you mean to say that by using the templates, I am 'removing' my hand; I am very excited by this conflict or 'mao-dun' (in Chinese). Because it means that though I have pored over my drawings (very hands-on, very involved, very fine details), the very templates that I am using to draw with, are causing a direct opposite effect – that of 'removing' my hand.

Referring to my doubts of art history, it is not only the western-centric that I am questioning. It is the whole idea of looking for meaning. I don't know if the personal has been subjugated; I was certainly trying to use the grids to measure and contain, yet complicate the person at the same time. I am trying to shift my focus on 'what' I observe, rather than try to arrive at 'why' I observe. I am afraid that by asking 'why' and continually looking for meaning, I would end up leaning on theories, histories and

obvious personal sentiments for meaning. which is why I am usually much more comfortable discussing my formal choices and working processes.

In my conversation with Lindy for The Happiness Index, I talked about the idea of 'a slow realisation'.

When we first brought Grace home, my being a new mother and being with my mom; watching her actions and listening to her words as she took care of Grace; triggered a slow realisation. basic realisation of time passed, deeper realisation of life mirrored. As she read to Grace and as Grace tried to get to know her, I found myself wondering what my mom used to read to me (thus leading to my looking at my old books) and what I got to know of her through the books we read together.

I am trying to apply this 'slowing down' and 'slowly realising' into my practice and process. very needed because I want to reflect on my past installations. And very apt for the act of measuring organising and understanding.

In the current series of drawings: I set up the parameters for what is presented as a miscellaneous collection of images (but are actually very personally meaningful), impose measuring instruments on these images (as if to structure and organise in order to arrive at some classification or

understanding). Then I prepare myself to be open to the images being 'lost' through the overlapping grids, circles etc (made with the instruments that should be helping me to organise and find). Through this, I complicate the imagery, slow down the process, and try to observe connections, co-relations or meanings resulting from the imposed parameters and the drawing process.

By 'now choosing space, depth, volume, shape, as encounters', I meant as opposed to your time-based works, you are working with the formal spatial elements of working on a picture plane.

[Sometimes it is difficult to find to right expression, worse, a mutual meeting of minds/comprehension, and I fudge along].

I enjoy your meditations on Grace and your mother. 'Slow realisations' – dare I say, epiphanies? Obviously here is 'meaning', and more obviously when it comes to practice/your exercises and its relation to meaning, there are two possibilities: resolution, and the other, of a tension, when things become fraught and things go awry.

'Measuring, organising and understanding', I wonder if this is the former or the latter. for me personally in my own efforts, the repetition of strokes made in the trace, in its organisation, is an exercise in ritual. My intention is to excavate memory. I find the ritual necessary, both in distancing myself from what I see, and at the same time, keeping myself as close to the surface of my... 'memory', if you like. It is the latter, tension is present though all appears ordered and calm. Tension, because things get worse in terms of what I remember, or refuse to remember, or bungle. At the outset, it is an exercise in futility.

You also mention what you do as organised around 'the immeasurable, the infinite and the miscellaneous'. Is it futile?

I was reading the interview with the author, Murakami, today in the papers (ST Life, 8 May 2013) and he talks about the necessity of going into 'the second basement'. Kind of dire. But in the face of the inability to speak of, we depend on poetry, shadows, metaphors. TS Eliot (preludes III):

*you dozed, and watched the night revealing  
the thousand sordid images  
of which your soul was constituted,  
they flickered against the ceiling.*