

ArtReview Asia



The trials and tribulations of 'decolonising' Berlin's museum collections

Maurizio Cattelan realises his dreams in Shanghai

What happens when industry becomes art? A report from Bengaluru

Zeng Fanzhi on heroes, monks, art histories and contemporaneity

Yahon Chang *Poetry of the Flow*

Palazzo Chiaramonte-Steri, Palermo 17 June – 19 August

The brutish architecture of Palermo's fourteenth-century Palazzo Chiaramonte-Steri – Romanesque windows framed by Arabic patterns, walls graffitied by inmates of the Spanish Inquisition – bears witness to the history of a city defined by the (intermittently harmonious) meeting of ideas and civilisations. Having outlived its purpose as a stronghold and later prison, the building's armoury has been repurposed as an exhibition space: one half displays a collection of religious frescoes, wooden crucifixes and chipped marble capitals; the other a new site-specific commission by Taiwanese artist Yahon Chang.

The first impression is of monochrome paintings dangled limply over racks and from the room's walls like washing put out to dry. On the long sides of the narrow gallery, rudimentary wooden structures (all works *Untitled*, 2018) are draped in unstitched, white cloth strips of uneven size and marked with black lines, regular patterns and jagged shapes resembling pictograms; a semi-enclosed room at the far end of the space from the entrance is ringed by fabrics that billow from the walls like windblown curtains. If it's not initially clear how this exhibition should be read – as an interlinking arrangement of individual

works on linen and paper, a series of discrete sculptural assemblages or a unified and immersive installation – then its success or failure depends ultimately on the viewer's willingness to suspend the urge to classify and segregate.

As much is clear from a press release stating that Yahon Chang is seeking to 'create a new language' that integrates, and presumably by doing so moves beyond, the Eastern and Western formal elements on which he draws. If each painted fabric in the patchwork is to be read as an expression of this synthesis, reconciling traditional Chinese inkwash techniques with the spattered gestural freedom of Expressionism, then their aggregation into these sculptural forms suggests a palimpsest, with different visual languages roughly overlapping in their description of a disputed and overwritten history.

Perhaps because it depends on the impression of something having been partially effaced, the work is least convincing when straightforwardly figurative, as when smiling faces can be discerned amidst the black swoops and swirls, and most interesting when teasing the viewer with the implication that a hidden meaning hovers just out of reach. On top of black sheets stretched over a wide frame like

a theatrical backdrop, a long band of white fabric marked with black curlicues unfurls to the floor, its end wrapped around a scroll stick.

The allusion to a manuscript reinforces the implication – introduced elsewhere by the calligraphic brushwork and repeated painted lines resembling handwritten pages – that these works are texts to be deciphered. Moreover, because a manuscript unfolds its information over the time it takes to read, that they could be pieced together to discover an intelligible (albeit fractured and elliptical) narrative. Yet the difficulty in relating the show's parts to its whole, and of identifying threads or patterns that run through it, mean that any such search is liable to be frustrated.

By moving beyond conventional signifiers towards more inchoate forms – cursive scribbles and rudimentary symbols – the inference is that the artist is moving towards something like the universal Chomskian grammar that underpins all world cultures, however great their superficial differences. If this approach is to be understood as a poetics, as the exhibition's title implies, then it sometimes slips into incoherence. In attempting to find a common language, the artist risks failing to make himself understood. *Ben Eastham*



Untitled (Poem #1), 2018, Chinese ink on paper, wood, 230 × 510 × 54 cm. Photo: Lane 216, East. Courtesy the artist