

Theresa Chong at Danese - Drawings

Art in America, April, 2000

by Jonathan Goodman

Music remains an inspiration for the Korean-born, New York-based artist Theresa Chong, who studied the cello at Oberlin College and, as a graduate student at the School of Visual Arts, came under the influence of John Cage. While working in New York for the composer and conductor Peter Kotik, Chong met Cage several times; Cage's use of chance in his music, as a way of expanding the range of sound, considerably affected her approach to art. For her graduate thesis, wishing to invent a process which incorporated energies outside of art and which would enrich her work, Chong created visual symbols that corresponded to musical notation.

In her exhibition of seven woodcuts, Chong translated actual musical works into visual equivalents. Using the etudes of the composer David Popper as her template, she devised a new language of symbols; her forms incorporate elements of Korean calligraphy, Roman lettering and, in some cases, the patterns of dots seen on dominoes. Chong goes so far as to indicate fingering with Arabic numbers; flats and sharps are marked by downward and upward arrows, respectively. The compositions correspond so closely to the notes of Popper's exercises that a musician could play the imagery, the artist says.

The mostly smallish prints (less than 2 feet square), all from 1999, are remarkable for their sensitivity and elegant detail. In P.E. 73, "Echo 1," neatly written symbols are lined up in vertical rows. The charcoal-gray work consists of two sheets of Korean-made rice paper, one above the other; Chong has arranged the signs on each sheet of paper so that they do not overlap. The meticulous rendering and alignment of the symbols achieve a notable grace. In addition, Chong incorporates some of the stylistic effects--textures and small blots--invented by Chujun, a Chinese engraver active in the 18th century, whose work she saw while attending an art fair.

What is interesting about Chong's work is the way her abstract imageries make use of another art form--in this case, music, which is in itself abstract. Against the dark gray, textured surface of the paper, the signs function both as image and symbol; they are attractive to look at, and they intimate both a process and pattern filled with metaphysical meaning. In P.E. 73, "Notation Series 1-2," the assembly of carefully rendered symbols results in a lyric order indicative of unseen but nonetheless real harmonies; the thoughtful rows of Chong's light marks, against the darkness of the paper, look like a wish to make sense of the world.