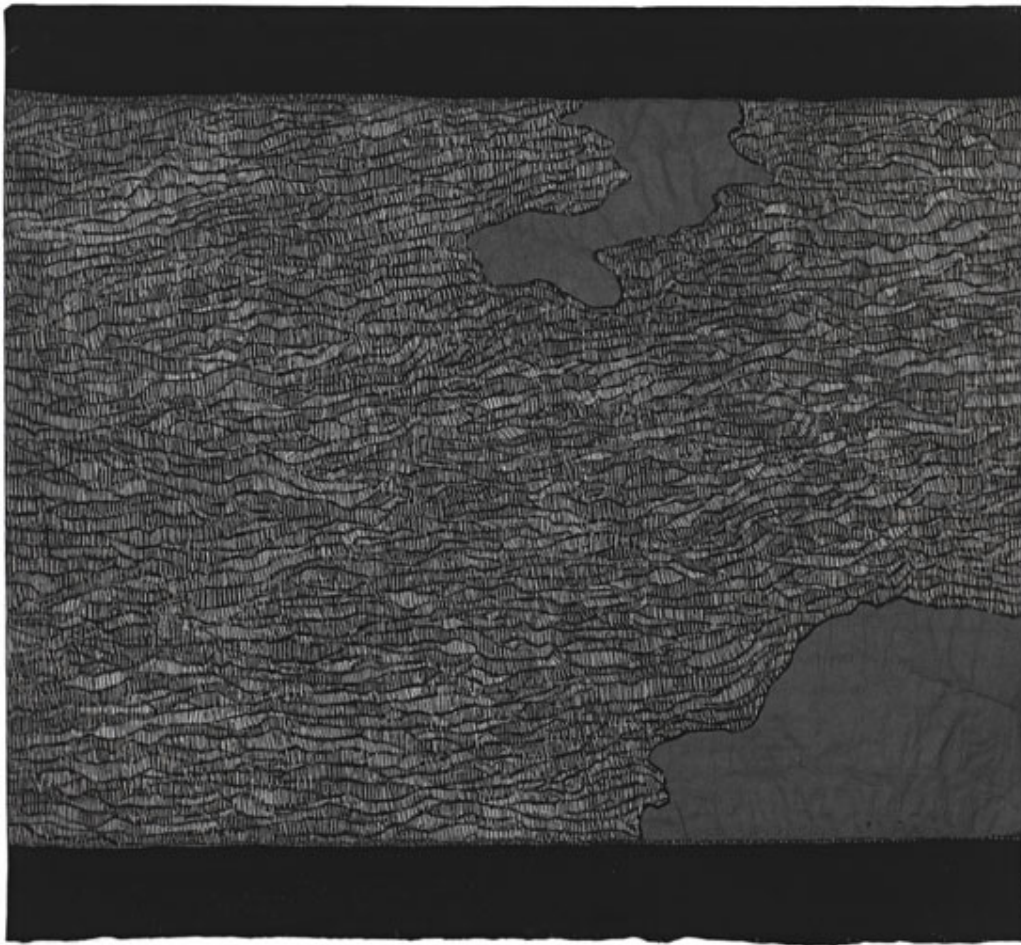


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## Imagined Landscape: Theresa Chong at Danese/Corey

by Jonathan Goodman



Theresa Chong, *K'UN (Earth)*, 2014. Colored pencil and gouache on hand-dyed indigo Japanese paper, 10-3/4 x 11-3/4 inches.

Inspired by meeting John Cage in New York in the 1990s, after pursuing cello studies at the Oberlin Conservatory, Theresa Chong's early work incorporated chance/random aesthetics and musical notation into elaborate and elegant ink painting. Now, midcareer, Chong returns to an abstraction that skirts Asian traditions in ways that are deeply original: small marks on exquisite paper hold their own between highly worked, nearly textural embellishments and a fine sense of overall composition. The small paintings, usually with top and bottom bands framing the composition, occupy that hybrid, Asian-Western territory that after the length of a generation has now reached the point where bridging two

distant cultures has become a critical cliché. This does not mean that Chong's efforts in this area are to be faulted; instead, it seems that the practice of appropriation has become so widespread as to lack the visual punch it once had.

But Chong's double reality has little to do with the theft of one style or the other. Instead, in her work we come face to face with a stylized treatment of abstraction built upon gouache brushstrokes and colored-pencil markmaking. Areas are constructed from darker and lighter shades of black and gray, so that the lighter domains feel very much like islands in a dark sea. While the first impression of the artist's efforts is that they are primarily abstract, over time they take on the suggestion of natural effects — of what exactly, we are not sure, but they do seem to imitate nature. The realms are not tied to a classic grid pattern; instead, they are resolutely organic in both small forms and the overall expanse of the composition. Chong points out a general direction for interpretation by naming her works according to entries in the *I Ching*, the ancient Chinese manual for the practice of divination. Titles such as *Following* or *Gathering Together* form a visual commentary on a literary text with a weighted philosophical orientation.

The patterns in the works correspond to rubbings of Chinese stone markers, as Lilly Wei points out in her catalog essay. The myriad small, fine lines represent duration, the passing of time, while the lighter sections of the drawings correspond to passages in which the stone has dwindled, the result of weathering. No matter the specific cause of the image, these drawings are resolutely beautiful, confirming a generally Asian perception of the artist's hand as it faces nature. But Chong does not necessarily stop there — it is important to realize that despite the static nature of drawing and painting, her works embody the notion of change over time. In *K'UN (Earth)* (2014), horizontal rows of very small vertical lines mass into two darkly painted organic shapes that look like lakes surrounded by a land mass. Two black bands, on top and below, frame the composition. The feeling is one of earthen weight — the image corresponds nicely to its title. And despite the small size, the feeling of density is very much alive in this piece, likely the result of the intricacies of the drawing's surface. The delicacy and large number of the short lines shows how a small surface can be loaded with weight thanks to the technical prowess of the artist.



The feeling of an imagined landscape is taken up in *Lu (Walking Carefully)* (2014), although nothing *specifically* belongs to a rendering of nature. A high number of lighter areas complicates the painting and gives it a variable density. These areas range from quite small to relatively large within the composition, which is nearly 12 inches square. Two broad black bands of paint contain this small scene, at once abstract and figurative in its suggestions. *Huan (Dispersion)* (2104) consists of a large, relatively white light area of crosshatching, with miniature points of white. Three smaller islands, composed of the small, darker lines, drift in the open sea of cross hatching, while a rough, dark triangular area dominate the upper right of the picture. The feeling is that of a still pulled from a film.

Collectively, these drawings of consummate skill and precision form a sequence that will remind Chong's audience of an album of Chinese ink paintings. While they lean toward abstraction and, as their titles imply, the portrayal of ideas, the pictures also abound with natural themes. Chong's combination of approaches indicates that nothing is entirely abstract or completely figurative. Discerning the similarities and the differences is a source of compelling pleasure.

See more at:

<http://www.artcritical.com/2014/11/06/jonathan-goodman-on-theresachong/#sthash.A7bOYHPk.dpuf>

above: Theresa Chong, LU (Walking Carefully), 2014. Gouache and colored pencil on Shikibu Gampi, 12 x 11-3/4 inches.