

MOUSSE

Su-Mei Tse “Nested” at Aargauer Kunsthhaus, Aarau

August 3, 2018

The Aargauer Kunsthhaus devotes a solo exhibition to the wide-ranging work of the Luxembourg artist Su-Mei Tse whose object art, photographic works, and videos are suffused with reflections on time, existence, memory, rhythm, and language. The exhibition features new works the artist created after sojourns in Italy and Japan.

Media such as photography, sculpture, and installation are central to Su-Mei Tse’s artistic practice. In them she articulates transitions between disparate realms—sound and image, music and space, nature and culture, mental space and sensory experience. Music, sounds, and silence enter into a unique interplay in the exhibition spaces and time seems to pass in a changed rhythm in them.



Su-Mei Tse has had a previous appearance at the Aargauer Kunsthhaus when she showed a poetic neon piece in the 2013 group exhibition Rhythm in it. Nested, her first institutional solo exhibition in Switzerland, presents the fruits of her artistic practice. After sojourns in countries such as Italy and Japan she has created new works which, realised especially for this occasion, form the gravitational centre of the show. In the exhibition spaces music, sounds, and silence enter into a unique interplay, and time in them seems to pass in a changed rhythm.

In Nested, Su-Mei Tse develops a distinct narrative for the Aargauer Kunsthhaus, combining the new works and site-specific installations with selected older works. New artistic paths of exploration become apparent: inquiries into the contemplative, into our relationship to the worlds of plants and minerals, or into the possibility of a sensitive relation to the past. With all those interwoven themes, the exhibition is laid out in the manner of a notebook, that is, a form in which quotidian visual or acoustic impressions or memories are gathered and then mixed in a subjective, intuitive way to form a network of echoing references and correspondences.

A case in point is the 2017 Nested series, which provides the title for the exhibition. It consists of a group of found limestone sculptures into whose niches variously coloured balls of stone are “embedded”. To the artist the sculptures symbolise the precarious balance between holding and being held. In a playful and poetic way, the colourful balls are equally reminiscent of marbles and of

the planets of a cosmic system. Other works in the exhibition similarly attest to Su-Mei Tse's interest in the mineral world and its primordial beauty. The elaborate installation *Stone Collection* (2017) draws its inspiration from the Chinese tradition of the "scholars' rocks". For each of the carefully selected rocks from different regions the artist has created a unique pedestal corresponding to the nature of the rock. Macro and microcosm become one in them, as landscapes, mountains, caves, clouds, or waves are hinted at in their surfaces. These works invite contemplative viewing.

In the exhibition we encounter an uprooted tree cast in bronze (*Trees and Roots*, 2011), a fresh pomegranate (*A Whole Universe [Pomegranate]*, 2017), or a landscape reflected in a lake (*Reflection*, 2017). In terms of subject matter, these sculptures and photographs revolve around the world of plants, but at the core of them are questions about "being in the world" and human existence. The individual and its uniqueness are similarly inscribed into the installation *Das Ich in jeder Kartoffel [The Self in Each Potato]* (2006–11). Each of the fifteen ceramic potatoes has its very own shape, and the tender sprouts point to the unbridled power of life that resides in every being. Su-Mei Tse manages to articulate such sweeping philosophical reflections from a point of view firmly anchored in everyday life and with a subtle, humorous wink. She seeks out the poetry of the everyday and renders it visible in her work.

Su-Mei Tse wants to create a language that unites rather than separates, a language that is expressive of not just one but multiple cultures and thus epitomises the boundless and the dynamic. The sculpture *Many Spoken Words* (2009/2018) is, in its surprising combination of materials used, the source for myriad associations. Blank ink gushes, flows, and drips from a pseudo-baroque garden fountain and symbolises "the process of language, from the original idea to the written word" (Su-Mei Tse). With her installation the artist pays homage to literature, alluding to the potential of words and the ever-renewing flow of creativity.

Some of the works presented in the exhibition *Nested* revolve around a critical reflection on the past and on historical and cultural references. Created during a fellowship at the Villa Medici in Rome, the 2015 video *Pays de Neige* shows the artist performing a ritual of erasure. In the light of a bleak winter sun the artist smooths the gravel path in front of the historically significant villa with a rake she pulls behind her. In doing so, she symbolically wipes away the traces of her predecessors and "prepares the canvas", in order to create "breathing space" for her own creativity and recover her own voice. The spirit of Zen pervading this video is hard to miss, but the artist deliberately avoids any identification with a typical geographic location. Due to her Eurasian background she carries two cultures within herself, which she constantly defamiliarizes in order to uncouple them from the stereotypes they are usually associated.

It is hardly surprising that music plays a key role in the work of the trained cellist Su-Mei Tse, though it is less simply a subject for her and more an evocative force which she uses as a magnifying glass through which she sees, and is able to comprehend, the world. Music is central to a number of

PETER BLUM GALLERY

works such as the 2006 video *Mistelpartition*. At the same time the absence of sounds, silence, is also of great importance in her work. In *White Noise* (2009) a vinyl record with small white balls set into its grooves is turning continually on a turntable. “White Noise” refers to an acoustic phenomenon where all audible frequencies are mixed to the point where they neutralise one another and give rise to a kind of “acoustic silence”. To Su-Mei Tse, the work represents a visual translation of rustling, the moment just before music begins, as if it were about “giving volume to silence”, and in this it allows the viewer a moment to pause.