

***Souvenirs de Choses* · Curatorial statement**

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“Immensity is within ourselves. It is attached to a sort of expansion of being that life curbs and caution arrests, but which starts when we are alone. As soon as we become motionless, we are elsewhere; we are dreaming in a world that is immense. Indeed, immensity is the movement of motionless man. It is one of the dynamic characteristics of quiet daydreaming.”

Gaston Bachelard

“As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect.”

In the opening of “The Metamorphosis,” Kafka avoids any exposition or refuses to provide explanations, bluntly declaring that the protagonist, Gregor Samsa, transforms from a diligent young man into a despicable and idle insect. The author turns absurdity into reality with just a few words, leaving us and Gregor to live a bizarre and surreal everyday life. We are left to question how one faces an inevitable fate and how to find meaning amid overwhelming change.

More than a hundred years later, artist Leung Mee Ping’s exhibition “*Souvenirs de Choses*” continues Kafka’s inquiry through a series of works depicting insects and dust—intentionally or unintentionally. How far are we from the absurd? And what about the distance between humans and non-human creatures? What is the essence of existence, ours and theirs? However, Leung Mee Ping does not sever the connection between the human world and the realm of insects as Kafka did. Instead,

she brings back the trivial “things” —flies, fleas, ant corpses, and dust—and questions the weight of their lives. Her works either depict exaggerated and distorted proportions or focus on tiny details, silently observing the universe of microorganisms. They prompt the audience to look at a spider in its dull, compound eyes, listen to the sighs of dust at deserted temples, and occasionally measure the spherical geometry of butterflies’ wings. In her works, things move, stay still, and feel heavy or light. However, between the visible and the invisible, they involve here and there, the mundane and the sacred, the tininess and the immensity, taking actions and doing nothing, and touch upon the meanings of the existence and non-existence, and the real and virtual. Through the works, the artist aims to explore the boundless universe reflected by the microorganisms, and also construct a poetic allegory of time and being.

Across the corner of the room, the night casts its shimmering hues, dissolving the logic of daily life and leaving us with no place to rest our selves. What do we rely on? Where do we turn our eyes? The animation work “*Souvenir de Choses*” magnifies the faceless creatures that were once so small and elusive. Their delicate movements — stretching their hind legs, fluttering their wings, expanding and contracting their mouthparts — are now all observable. Their big, empty eyes confront us directly, forcing people to choose this moment to be more memorable than the myriad of daily spectacles. These giant and clumsy creatures even dare to approach us, demanding that we witness their lives unfold and assign meanings to every gesture of them. In this moment of the dark night, the artist gives form to what she gazes upon. Her work carries the desire to be seen and to see, as well as the viewers yearning. A yearning to see through the incomprehensible logic of life. A yearning to understand our place in the world. At this moment, the artist's black-and-white negative images occupy our retinas, and the intimate corners of the room expand more disorderly, transforming into a dream-like open space. It is drowsy here, and

time stagnates. The movements of microorganisms are adjusted to match the minute-by-second pace of human perception. Are we the human beings who dream of being a microorganism, or is it the microorganism that dreams about becoming us? It is the moment when the work breaks away from the tiny creatures' biological clock but repeats a specific chapter of their life, making the present connect with the past, the past collides with the future, and the future meets the present. Ultimately, the intimate dream transforms into an infinite universe, and different dimensions of time are intertwined, asking what is the difference between that moment and this moment, and what meaning does it mean to whom?

Unfortunately, what I see, what you attentively notice, and what he has witnessed, are all vastly different and give rise to a myriad of concepts and values in the bustling world, making it almost impossible to find common ground. What to look at? How to look? What does it mean to truly see?

By examining the countless blessings and misfortunes throughout time, what is the angel who safeguards the mission box trying to convey to us?

Ecclesiastes states, "To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up..."

Having witnessed the endless cycles of blossoming and withering, what does the mudra pose of the Guanyin statue summon?

The Heart Sutra says: "Form is no other than emptiness, Emptiness no other than form. The form is only emptiness; Emptiness is only forms. Feeling, thought, and choice, Consciousness itself, Are the same as this."

The reason to see is about the eyes and the light. How are things edited to appear the way we see them? How do our perspectives construct a narrative of time, evoking memories within a specific temporal context? What do memories ultimately leave behind – the sorrows and joys of time or the blindness and rationality of an era? Looking back to the morning of September 11, 2001, at 8:46 am, a commercial aeroplane crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center. Seventeen minutes later, another plane struck the South Tower. Intense flames and sooty smoke erupted from the Twin Towers, instantly engulfing the sunlight and the sky. At 9:58 am, the South Tower collapsed in just 11 seconds. Thirty minutes later, the North Tower also crumbled alongside with explosive sounds. Amidst the sadness, anger, and hatred portrayed in news clips, Leung Mee Ping, from a high vantage point, captured the vacant ground of the area - the once vibrant and glamorous Manhattan had vanished, replaced only by vast clouds of smoke and debris. Scientific analysis proves that the swirling dust collected by the artist contains fiberglass, human hair, fragments of skyscrapers, cellulose fibres from paper, and synthetic materials from carpets. Indistinguishable, the dust encapsulates the essence of the working places and victims within the Twin Towers. It memorialises the vibrant lives and prosperity created by the people and their companies, yet its lingering presence silently testifies to the ephemeral nature of rise and fall. The dust dances with the wind, perhaps representing the unwillingness of the departed souls to fade into nothingness, beckoning the artist to listen to their silent cries. Thus, the artist found the dust, and her creative practice transformed it into the “eternal present” of time, allowing us to depict the "appearance" of violence and death.

The Book of 2 Corinthians confirms, “Because we do not regard the things which are seen but the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.”

How can we grasp the intangible and elusive nature of time? "Ant Running End", another work by the artist, takes us into a contemporary drama of A Dream Under the Southern Bough. The projector's blazing heat creates a barren yet fantastical habitat, where the ants find themselves busy in the slides, unaware that their entire lives have been magnified and projected onto a blank wall. It is said that the lifespan of ordinary worker ants ranges from a few days to a month, but within this realm, their lives are condensed into about half an hour. With limited time, how do the ants run this colony? How do they develop their sense of time, even if brief, to avoid falling into the void of non-doing? Leung Mee Ping extracts thirty minutes, connecting scenes of managing busy lives, losing oneself, and developing routines and rules, weaving them into the life stories of the ant colony. These fragments of *deja vu* remind us of ourselves and illuminate the beauty and melancholy of the life process of formation, continuance, destruction, and emptiness with time.

Perhaps time never separates from our beings. When flowers bloom in spring, it is the time blossoms directly as an existence known as "flowers", and simultaneously the flowers also express the time defined as "spring". In other words, spring blooming is an expression of "being-time".

Zen master, Dogen says: "It moves from today to tomorrow; it moves from today to yesterday; it moves from yesterday to today; it moves from today to today; it moves from tomorrow to tomorrow."

Life arises, and death follows; death occurs, and life is born. Everything rises and falls within the flow of time. The work, "Underneath the Feet, is Ground" is a visually unappealing tile. However, upon closer observation, this tile teems with dark, sticky yellowish secretions and emits a sour, putrid odour, as it is composed of countless ant corpses. Folk remedies claim that soaking black ants in alcohol promotes circulation, relieves pain, and combats inflammation and ageing. Though the death of the ant colony is inevitable, the imagination of nourishing life takes them into the temporal sequence of another species, attempting to resist the uncompromising control of the biological clock. Leung Mee Ping happened to encounter a health product vendor at a market in Wuhan and spontaneously incorporated the ant corpses into her contemporary artwork, disregarding their immediate medicinal value. A fleeting thought gave birth to the brick of the deceased in an art exhibition, breaking the cycle of life and death intertwined in the natural world, simultaneously igniting both the silent, inconspicuousness of death and the fervour of life. This small,

subtle piece of work, acrid and unbearable, directly arouses our bodily senses, causing us to wrinkle our brows and cover our noses, subtly pointing to a land of nothingness. Perhaps, that is where time abruptly stops, transcending the realm of life and death and venturing into the realm of aesthetic imagination.

There is no way to describe the state of nothingness. Who has ever freed themselves from the shackles of time, glimpsing the eternal and immortal secret from their limited existence? Leung Mee Ping's video installation, "Dust," plays footage of her going to churches and temples in desolate and uninhabited areas, taking on the role of a janitor to collect the dust from these sacred spaces meticulously. Dust to dust, ash to ash, all matter can be reduced to dust. It is the tiniest substance visible to the naked human eye, existing in minerals, seeds, pollen, mould, feathers, skin, blood, and excrement, among others. The presence of dust signifies the accumulation of time, both concealing what it covers and revealing the prolonged absence and near nonexistence of the covered objects. However, while dust is omnipresent and immeasurably small, it is curiously the closest thing to eternity in the human world. It may come from a gentle breeze just a moment ago or from a distant moment when cosmic dust particles fell into the atmosphere, burned and emitted light, and then scattered on the earth thousands of years ago. The artist collects dust in uninhabited settings, erasing the traces of time's flow as if restoring its untainted and transcendent nature. It is also a remembrance of the tiny particles of time that have come from generations of "nonhuman" environments to try to comprehend the broader course of time beyond human life and death.

Who has ever grasped one single moment? Who has ever felt the flight of time? As shown on the screen, a thin sheet of paper gently glides, leaving behind square, distinct traces. Softly and lightly, the paper brushes and sweeps, and layer by layer, the dust accumulates into a brick. Time enables dust to accumulate into bricks, and these dust bricks will also dissipate with time. The dust reveals that everything ultimately returns to emptiness. Still, its modest existence stubbornly presents

moments from thousands of years ago that we have never experienced and may not even comprehend. Curiously, Leung Mee Ping uses dust to create bricks, as if recreating how time accumulates and how it disappears in the blink of an eye. As humans, we find it difficult to perceive the ever-changing nature of the world entirely, only able to grasp a few fragments until it becomes the past, until it is history, and until it is the dust from that cosmic storm. The video of brick-making touches the elusive past while gently lifting the present as if leaving behind an endless hope before everything returns to silence.

Don't forget that in 1915, Mr Insect from Kafka's fiction died. In 2013, Haruki Murakami turned Mr Insect back into Gregor and even had him fall in love with a hunchbacked girl in war-torn Prague. Encountered the unpredictability of fate, Gregor, from this lifetime, ponders deeply:

“For sure, it was a great inconvenience to have to walk on two legs and wear clothes. There were so many things he didn’t know. Yet had he been a fish or a sunflower, and not a human being, he might never have experienced this emotion. So he felt.”

What does Leung Mee Ping's microorganism mean now? Her works do not have the dramatic ups and downs of a novel plot but carry a keen and sensitive touch. Through her creative practice, she invites us to imagine the countless scenarios in which creatures transform from insects to humans and humans to insects. What kind of life are these Gregors leading in the mundane world? Who knows that we are just worms bent on comprehending the world of mortals or people who pretend to be worms living from day to day? Regardless of who we are, we no longer have any excuses to look the other way. We must face the humblest of beings and their interconnected world—the transient world in which you, me, and it are all

entangled—and discover the meaning within our own existence.