

THE MUSICAL EYE

BY HG MASTERS



SU-MEI TSE

SU-MEI TSE, *Stone Collection II*, 2018,
5 found stones on pedestal, wood, sand,
dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist
and Kiang Malingue, Hong Kong.



Emptied

In a room at the top of Kiang Malingue's vertical gallery building in the Wan Chai neighborhood of Hong Kong, large double-height windows overlook the trees across the alleyway. Before the windows, in late 2024, for her exhibition "Daydreams," Su-Mei Tse had laid eight white porcelain sheets resembling folio pages onto translucent silk paper on the floor. High up on the wall to the right of this configuration was a 1.5-meter-square image of the moon. On the left wall, closer to ground level, was a framed photograph of a marble Roman bust, the woman's nose smashed off, her tight curls still intact.

The contemplative poise of the objects, their collective evocation of a poet or musician sitting at a desk before a blank sheet of paper, with a view of trees, the moon overhead, the spirit of antiquity at hand—all suggested a Romantic scene of inspiration stirring before the pen is lifted. The space was silent, meditative. Tse explained that the first time she came into the space several months prior she felt "there was nothing to do here because it was already so meditative and perfect." The installation then arose as a composition that maintained that sensibility, conveying the sense of the "breath before something is written."

In physical terms, Tse's works are both less and more than their components. They can come to her first as a thought or fleeting impression, and later evolve through longer moments of contemplation. A classically trained cellist from a family of musicians (her father played the violin; her mother, the piano), she often employs musicality—whether a sense of sound, a measured silence, or a visual reference—as an intangible feature of her multisensory assemblages, which may include sculptures, found objects, photographic imagery, and videos of performative gestures. In effect, she composes her exhibitions. There is not a narrative but a visual sequence, and a desire to create what she calls "timeless moments."

In "Daydreams," a potent emptiness revealed itself over time. The blank porcelain sheets on the floor, titled *Love Letters* (2024), are like fresh pages awaiting the first marks—or perhaps, as the artist suggested, the words have disappeared, lost to time. *Far Side of the Moon* (2022), for instance, is not a photo of the rugged lunar surface but a digital composite reflecting Tse's imagination of the distant and unseeable side (from Earth) of our orbiting companion. Tse said she was thinking about how our ideals of love and beauty are intertwined and then projected onto nature through arts such as poetry or painting. Likewise, the bust in the photograph *Roman Head* (2017/24) evokes thoughts on the passage of time, as the once-famous empress (Domitia Longina), whose face was chiseled in stone and painted to preserve her memory, is now unknown to most people and here stripped down to a raw, fragile materiality.

Together, the three works function like a composition, mirroring the musical sense of arranging notes in time and space, across different registers in a score, to bring out resonances and harmonies of ideas. They also reflect Tse's interest in what she called materials that display a "vulnerability and fragility" yet, in their mutedness, manifest "an openness to receive" our emotional projections or ideas. "Contemplation," Tse told curators Christophe Gallois and Katrin Weilenmann, "means taking the time to make what we see become active . . . and, in this way, it is a kind of journey back into ourselves."

Tse's interest in interior states of being and the manifestation of thoughts into forms, of the "breath before" something comes into being, was visualized in the single-channel video *Shaping* (2019), which depicts a clay pot being turned on a wheel, forming and unforming in close-up, with a pair of hands guiding its creation. The pottery wheel spins like a record, accompanied by a white noise of low frequencies. The endlessly spinning wheel evokes the daydream as a mental space just before deliberate thought or articulation, as



SU-MEI TSE, *Roman Head*, 2017–24, fine art print on Hahnemühle mounted on Dibond, shadow gap wooden frame, 122.5×87.5 cm (framed). Courtesy Kiang Malingue, Hong Kong.



Installation view of **SU-MEI TSE's** *Love Letters*, 2024, eight porcelain sheets, silk paper, dimensions variable. Photo by Samson Wong Pak Hang. Courtesy Kiang Malingue, Hong Kong.



the clay perpetually hovers in a liminal state between becoming an object and devolving into formless material again.

Entangled

Tse's exhibition title, "Daydreams," was an invitation to explore this state of consciousness. What are daydreams but thoughts that depart from the reality of the immediate moment, tangents that take us out of the present and into the future or back into the past? In a 1907 lecture, Sigmund Freud held that daydreaming, which is fundamental to the creative act, is rooted in the artist's desire to alter the often unsatisfactory world of reality by conjoining the past and present into a more pleasant future. He suggested that seeing others' daydreams come to life in works of art has a cathartic effect, offering us "a liberation of tensions in our minds . . . enabling us thenceforward to enjoy our own daydreams without self-reproach or shame." For Tse, this precious mental space is counterintuitively a way "to handle everyday experience and to deal with suffering in the world by shifting our view."

On a small shelf in the gallery's staircase sat *Broken (teapot)* (2024), an arrangement of ceramic shards in front of a photograph of these same pieces on a tabletop. "It happened—like these simple things that happen," Tse remarked. She took a picture to show her friend. Afterward she decided she liked the image, and it became an artwork in her head. As we looked at it, she reminded me that now it is a still life, "a *nature morte*." A moment of sadness or frustration, perhaps, transformed into an image, and a memento mori for this broken object. As Tse implied, the genre of still life—a composition of symbolically potent objects—has long been used by artists as a microcosm for the world.

Expanding on this idea of carefully arranged objects as a metaphorical space, Tse, in a large windowless white-cube space, had placed a white square table bearing an arrangement of 19 cast plaster objects, an installation titled *Entanglements* (2024). She made these plaster forms by crumpling pieces of paper, wrapping them in twine and then casting them. What thoughts, notes, or false starts might those pages have contained? Erased in the casting process, those ideas and emotions have become tantalizingly unknowable to us. On the wall was a photograph of a single plaster form against a pristine white background. Much like the classical bust upstairs that once had a nose and painted features, the white-on-white photograph allows us to wonder, imagine, or daydream—becoming a symbol of what could have been, once was, or could still come into being.

In explaining the work, Tse noted that there are moments, when, whether as an artist or writer, or simply as a common mortal, we feel trapped. Her idea was to visualize these "entanglements," to spend time with them by binding them carefully, and then letting these moments go. She associates the whiteness of the work with silence, the anxious moment just before a thought becomes legible, before ideas are transformed into physical reality. In his essay on Japanese aesthetics, *In Praise of Shadows* (1933), writer Junichiro Tanizaki contends that in Japanese music "most important of all are the pauses," a technique that modern media like the radio cannot well accommodate. In her work, Tse wrestles with silence and speaking. "What's going on in the world," she told me, "is not very inspiring nor helping to create with lightness." Instead, "we use the noise to *not* focus on what we don't want to. We don't *want* to be in silence." For her, then, the silence of *Entanglements* is not only an escape from clamor but a way of "taking time and also taking care."

Installation view of SU-MEI TSE's *Broken (teapot)*, 2024, color photograph mounted on Dibond, acrylic, and ceramic shards, photograph: 30 × 40 cm, sculpture: 6.5 × 26 × 18 cm. Courtesy Kiang Malingue, Hong Kong.

Installation view of SU-MEI TSE's *Entanglements*, 2024, 19 plaster sculptures, table, fine art print Hahnemühle mounted on Dibond, wooden frame with museum glass, dimensions variable. Photo by Samson Wong Pak Hang. Courtesy Kiang Malingue, Hong Kong.

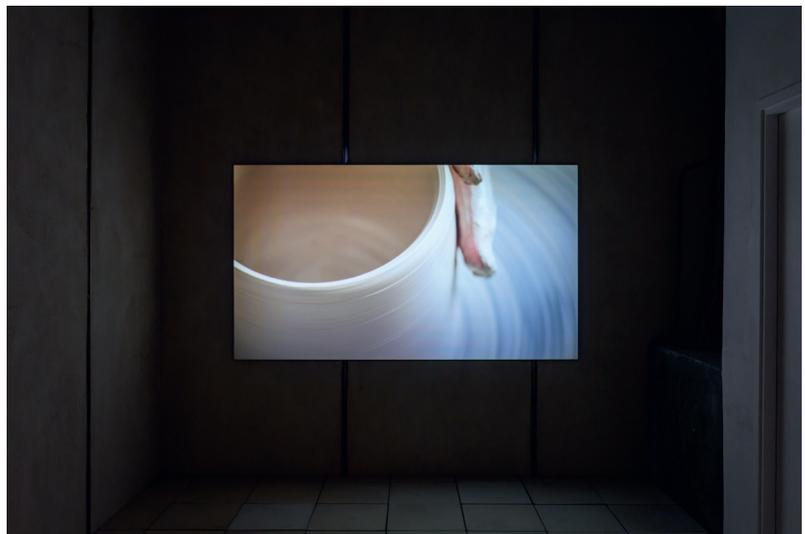
Nestled

When we sat in the office downstairs to have coffee, Tse lit a candle in front of Sonic Youth's album *Daydream Nation* (1988), which was sitting on a ledge. "It's been a deeply depressing time," she remarked. "Poetry is a breath of fresh air—we are so negative about ourselves. Being connected is necessary." The cover of this iconic alternative rock album features one of German postwar painter Gerhard Richter's slightly blurred photorealist paintings of a candle. The candle Tse lit burned slowly, eventually becoming the same height as the one on the album cover, forging a fleeting coincidence of two realities. Richter's 1983 candle images have been associated with gestures of protest in the German Democratic Republic (East Germany), while also being compared to 17th-century *vanitas* paintings that symbolize the ephemerality of our existence. The work also evokes Tse's earlier video *Light* (2014), a sustained close-up of a burning candle wick that slowly begins to re-grow over time because the video is chronologically reversed at its midpoint—much like the cycles of formation and deformation of clay on a pottery wheel seen in the video *Shaping*.

Tse's artworks also frequently make reference to famously contemplative art from the past. Her interest in scholars' rocks can be seen in two bodies of work: *Nested* (2016–19) and *Stone Collection* (2017). In the former, Tse selected pieces of limestone, into whose niches she placed colorful marble balls. There is an emphasis on arrangement within these sculptures, on the balance between the largely unsculpted forms of the limestone and the highly refined spheres. The rocks and the orbs function as a microcosm of the solar system. In 2019 works from the *Nested* series, Tse used copper mineral rocks, with tourmaline and obsidian balls. She values the interrelation of the elements and the tension of holding and being held: "Being nested is also a metaphor for our balance and our consciousness in the present moment."

Tse's *Stone Collection* series was shown in the touring exhibition "Nested"—which originated in 2017 at MUDAM in Luxembourg and traveled over the course of two years to Aargauer Kunsthaus in Aarau, Switzerland, the Yuz Museum in Shanghai, and finally the Taipei Fine Arts Museum. For the rocks Tse created custom pedestals—primarily solid-colored, modernist bases—that are formally at odds with the classical Chinese associations of the stones. "I like to create contrasts," she noted in our conversation. For her, *Stone Collection*, like *Entanglements*, is about "taking the time for contemplation" as well as "being receptive to nature," as these different rocks can begin to resemble mountains, caves, clouds, and waves, depending on a viewer's associations.

Installation view of SU-MEI TSE's *Shaping*, 2019, video projection with sound: 11 min 50 sec. Photo by Samson Wong Pak Hang. Courtesy Kiang Malingue, Hong Kong.

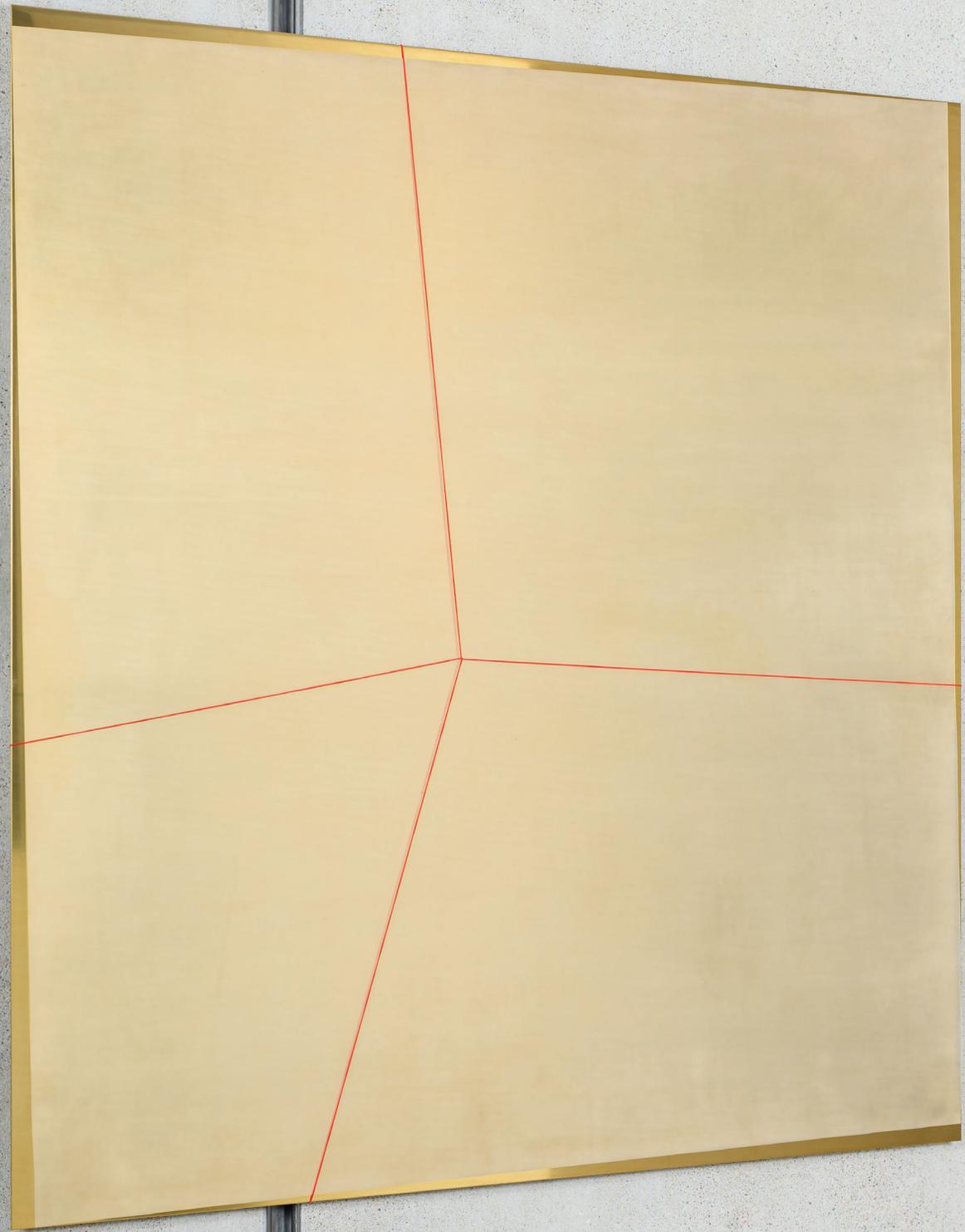




SU-MEI TSE, *Nested #3*,
2016, limestone, polished
mineral, marble balls,
30×33×26 cm. Courtesy the
artist and Kiang Malingue,
Hong Kong.



SU-MEI TSE, *Nested #2*,
2016, limestone, polished
mineral, marble balls,
30×21×20 cm. Courtesy the
artist and Kiang Malingue,
Hong Kong.



Tse works with words as well as with materials “as an anchor” that holds viewers in the present moment. We talked about the small sculpture *Ear (nested)* (2024), which was located near the gallery’s entrance, comprising a found bird’s nest atop an Italian-style table. Sitting in the nest is a black-and-white image of an ear from a Greek sculpture, which appears like a Surrealist sign in this readymade sculpture, inviting visitors to eavesdrop or listen carefully—Tse specifically employed the German word *lauschen*.

The shape of the ear is echoed in the shape of the shells of the sculpture *Survival (shells)* (2024), a ball of seashells around 20 centimeters in diameter that sat in a vitrine near *Ear (nested)*. On the wall in that downstairs space were three brass plates, *Sealed 1–3* (2024), each 110 centimeters square with two intersecting pieces of red string, the pairs positioned differently in each work to divide the surface into four distinct spaces. A semi-translucent sheet of silicone rests slightly askew on each panel. Tse explained that the form refers to *tsutsumu*—the Japanese art of beautifully wrapping objects, especially gifts, to protect them and show respect to others. In Tse’s compositions, the intersecting red strings create abstract formations on the surfaces and faintly allude to her training with a stringed instrument.

Words, or linguistic associations, are part of the web of relations that Tse spins in her installations. On the ledge of one landing at Kiang Malingue was a 12-centimeter cracked ball of earth, *Dorodango* (2024), named after the Japanese practice of hand-shaping and polishing mud balls. Behind on the gallery wall was *God sleeps in stone* (2024): stainless-steel lettering quoting a passage from Sufi mystic Ibn al-‘Arabi (1165–1240): “God sleeps in stone / breathes in plants / dreams in animals and awakens in man.”

While she spoke about poetry, Tse is always looking in other directions as well. Her sculpture of a fountain, *Many Spoken Words* (2009–17), shown in “Nested” and in her previous exhibition at Kiang Malingue in Hong Kong in 2017, is a classical-looking European fountain with ink flowing from the top to a larger pool at the bottom. Here, Tse said, she was interested in “the idea of undoing the words, getting back from the written word to the spoken word, and back to an original idea and the origin of things. The flow of ink as an ongoing loop.”

Returning to her musical training, she told me that she still sees herself as a musician but has found that art is a better, or freer, way to express herself and translate what she has to say. She also noted that being an artist means she does not have to specialize in one skill like a professional musician, and she is able to be receptive to what she sees.

Finally, after we looked at her photographs of koi swimming in a pond whose surface reflects the sky and trees, Tse discussed her idea of the “poetical view,” an approach that pervades many of her works. *Mistelpartition (Mistle Score)* (2006), for example, comprises a video and a series of still images that depict round bundles of mistletoe lodged in rows of barren winter trees. She recounted how, while she was driving through a landscape and listening to Dmitri Shostakovich’s *Cello Concerto No. 1 in E flat major* (1959), the natural bunches appeared to her as musical notes on a score. As an artist, she often starts with “things that I find that come to me at the right moment.”

Regarding how she composes her exhibitions, Tse reflected: “The way I work is connected to memory. The chronology is not so important. Everything is a whole for me, an older work can always fit with the others. Here in Hong Kong, I created new works, but they all have their existence—not in a particular time.”