

Fractured words ultimately crystalise

Sen Naganawa

Closed books, rubbed out words, carved up dictionaries . . . is Cécile trying to put this verbiage to sleep, to fossilise words like beautiful crystals in the silent depths of the earth? No, surely she wants to revive the unspoken spirits of all things visible, the cries of their souls prior to worded meanings. Spoken words and written letters must convey in order to mean. But words can be misconstrued, as when superficial interpretations are taken for true meaning, distorting the real idea. Cécile wants to liberate conflicted words from their own incurable ills.

Possessed of a strong will to regenerate words — to reawaken their true latent power — Cécile has dared as an artist to pare away their meanings. In her hands, words are reduced to voiceless letters, to meaningless signs, to prearticulate primitive particles, to modelled shapes. Taking on material textures and lovely colours to speak a new formative aesthetic language, their displacement outside of books and manuscripts prompts viewers to puzzle over her intent.

To solve the riddles embedded in Cécile's works is to question the value of words and how very important it is for us to invent formative language shared in common with the world. Letters turned into matter stripped of meaning are specially suited as material for artistic creation; their signification in art no doubt avails upon afterimages of those deconstructed words. How we recreate those afterimages in our mind's eye and decipher them as a crystallised art language is thus a key to appreciating Cécile's works.

More than just words, however, the architectural setting of the works is another important key to Cécile's formative creation. Most of her installations fit seamlessly to the shape of windows, walls and floors so as to reconfigure such spatial characteristics and historic aspects into the works as aesthetic signs.

This time, her chosen site is the Edo period clan house Chihan'an in Izu, where in place of *tatami* mats she has carpeted three Japanese-style rooms with soft, enticing squares of shredded paper. Patterns from red kimono for swaddling newborn infants, *tanzaku* poetry calligraphs, clan elders' wills . . . diverse heritage materials evoking the inner life of the

household were first slivered to equanimity, then plowed under as if a rich mulch to summon forth new vitality from this historic dwelling. The result is a space of wordless stillness where we confront a grand pageant of time, of reincarnating generations cycling repeatedly from birth to death.

Cécile also took interest in the backyard grove of bamboo, cedars and cypresses. Here and there upon the mute trees, smaller works sprout forth like dotted ellipses between phrases, expressing the wordless spells of forest spirits . . . Simple mounded forms, they must embody Cécile's ideal image of the souls of words.

Over the short span between birth and death, people entrust their life to words, passing on what meaning they find to deserving others. The wisdom of our ancestors recorded in history is layered thick with words like so much earth. Cécile crosses over cultural differences to plough that vast fertile ground of words through her art. As she herself notes, the French word *culture* connotes both agrarian and mental cultivation: tilling the fields to sow crops for sustenance and likewise tilling the mind to raise culture and art. And so here at Chihan'an, a setting that fairly breathes history and culture, Cécile farms language so the seeds of art she plants may grow a yet newer *culture* in the mind of all who come visit.

translated by Alfred Birnbaum, © Chihan Art. All Rights Reserved.