



The Renaissance Society
at The University of Chicago

Su-Mei Tse:

March 13 – April 17, 2005

The Renaissance Society

at The University of Chicago
5811 South Ellis Avenue
4th floor
Chicago, IL 60637

Museum Hours
Tuesday - Friday: 10 am - 5 pm
Saturday, Sunday: 12 - 5 pm
Closed Mondays
<http://www.renaissancesociety.org>

Su-Mei Tse: The Ich - Manifestation

March 13 – April 17, 2005

Opening Reception: March 13, 4:00-7:00 pm
Featuring a talk with the artist from 5:00-6:00pm

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5811 South Ellis Avenue
Chicago, Illinois 60637
Phone: (773)702-8870

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Thank God for Charles Darwin

Let this be said on behalf of the entire animal kingdom. Unshackled from the Great Chain of Being, fauna are now free to make one another's acquaintance in a fashion more mutual than one imposed by a divine order in which humankind was thought to hold a place above all other species. Having persisted from Classical Antiquity through the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance, the Great Chain of Being was an elaborate framework whose ranking system was based on a spirit-to-matter ratio with inanimate objects at the bottom of the list. There were hierarchies within the various strata so that within the category of, say, metals, gold was thought to contain more spirit than lead, or within the category of birds, eagles contained more spirit than chickens. The strata, however, were distinct and there was no continuum between humans and animals. In this respect, humans stood outside of nature. An inquiry into the nature of being in which the strata were distinct and quantity of spirit accounted for difference was obviously of no comfort to Darwin, who refused to view humans as the product of exemplary creation. As part of nature we were subject to the laws of evolution, laws determined by the struggle for existence. The formulation of a common equation among and a continuum within various species laid the groundwork for qualitative comparison. And so the mystery begins.

Do animals have presence of mind? This is as much a question for scientists who study comparative cognition as it is for Luxembourg-based artist Su-Mei Tse. For her installation at The Society, entitled *The Ich-Manifestation*, Tse videotaped a group of five tortoises whose images are projected in slow motion over a series of five large screens and are accompanied by an audio track heavy on the bass frequencies. At a scale several times larger than life, Tse's tortoises recall their Jurassic era cousins, the dinosaurs. Are they aware of themselves, however, as survivors of any such species continuum? The use of "Ich" (The German

word for "I") in the title of the exhibition begs the more pointed question: do they possess knowledge of self to the extent that they understand themselves as individual beings?

That is a heavy trip to lay on an animal whose very appearance suggests burden. The tortoise does not seem to mind, however, which is perhaps why it is a universal symbol of such virtues as patience, self-reliance, and wisdom. Given their life span and the gradual pace of their movement, it is no wonder we attribute to them these qualities. Not to belittle the fight for survival and procreation, but what else do they have to think about? That would depend on what constitutes thinking. Introspection, consciousness, problem solving, emotion, memory—the slopes of cognition and psychology are slippery indeed. Just as it was left to the tortoise to explain Xeno's paradox to Achilles in Lewis Carroll's short fable, "What the Tortoise Said to Achilles," perhaps Tse is using the tortoise to tell us that the riddle of being is in fact a paradox of infinite proportion. The *Ich-Manifestation* is then hardly a portrait of tortoises. It is rather a portrait of humanity in a quest for self-knowledge deflected on to animals, which is in keeping with a definition of culture as the time-less act of ascribing meaning to nature. Despite the use of video technology, *The Ich Manifestation* can take its place alongside a host of animal imagery dating back to the cave drawings of Lascaux. The medium may have changed but the question remains the same. Brother wind, sister turtle, what is on your mind?

Related Events

Concert
Monday, March 14, 8:00pm
oso, Zs and Flockterkit

The evening's bill begins with oso, an eclectic trio headed by singer/songwriter Phil Taylor, known for his unique guitar work and quirky arrangements, which have been referred to as post-glitch folk art and organic traveling music. The Zs (Sam Hillmer, Alex Mincek, Charlie Looker, Matthew Hough, Brad Wentworth, Ian Antonio) are a double trio (two saxophones, two guitars, two drummers) from New York. Working between the worlds of avant rock and new music, the Zs often explore the extremes of compositional complexity and virtuosity as well as extended repetition. Chicago's own Flockterkit (Aram Shelton, Ernst Karel, Fred Lonberg-Holm, Jason Roebke, Frank Rosaly) includes some of the most vibrant improvisers and composers from the local experimental music scene. Featuring acoustic instruments and electronics, the group focuses on texture and driving rhythms, working between jazz and electroacoustic composition. This event takes place in the gallery. FREE

Concert
Thursday, March 24, 8:00pm
The MAVerick Ensemble
Irregular Doublings

Greg Anderson, percussion
Steve Butters, percussion
Matthew Coley, percussion
Barbara Haffner, cello
Joshua Manchester, percussion
William Jason Raynovich, cello

Under the title *Irregular Doublings*, this bill features MAVerick Ensemble percussionists with cellists in works by such diverse composers as American rock music icon Frank Zappa to electronic music icon Mario Davidovsky to Indonesian composer I Wayan Sadra to MAVerick composer William Jason Raynovich. Each performer will be a featured soloist having a chance to have the spotlight in this exciting selections of pieces. The MAVerick Ensemble tries to bring unusual, rarely heard works to Chicago. This concert is no exception with one world premiere and a couple of Chicago premieres alongside less heard pieces by prominent composers of the 20th century. Additionally, Zappa's famous or infamous *Black Page* will be a treat for all of the Zappa fanatics in Chicago. With all of the percussion music on this program, the evening will surely be one to remember.

Su-Mei Tse: *The Ich-Manifestation* has been made possible through generous support from the National Endowment for the Arts. Additional support has been received from Alphawood Foundation; Chicago Community Trust; the CityArts Program of The Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs, a municipal agency; Christie's; The Danielson Foundation; Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation; the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency; LaSalle Bank; The LLWW Foundation; The MacArthur Fund for Arts and Culture at Prince; The Peter Norton Family Foundation; the Provost's Discretionary Fund at The University of Chicago; The Pritzker Foundation; The Siragusa Foundation; and our membership.

AmericanAirlines is the official airline of The Renaissance Society's 2004-2005 season.

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Su-Mei Tse
video still from
The Ich-Manifestation, 2005

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