

The Cliff and the Angel: Some Thoughts on Lie Fhung's *Life Force*

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The paradoxical power of Lie Fhung's new solo exhibition, *Life Force*, lies in the way it envelops us within a physical and emotional terrain that is at once captivating and terrifying. This is a world marked by fragility and force, with dizzying changes in perspective lead us to jagged gleaming cliffs and delicately translucent white flowers; to ethereal microcosms where porcelain wings captured inside glass bell jars; to monumental mountainscapes of oxidized copper, hammered, etched, carved and torched into being; and to the crepuscular darkness of an otherworldly garden whose eerie ceramic blossoms, suspended in mid-air by twisted metal vines, can crumble at the slightest touch.

Marking a critical moment in Lie Fhung's artistic evolution, *Life Force* is comprised of works created by the artist in the last three to four years, and showcases the uniqueness both of Fhung's artistic sensibility and of her creative daring. Her two primary materials – clay and metal – are not only contrasting but almost antithetical in nature, yet in her semi-abstract landscapes and porcelain sculpted forms she is able to illuminate the organic, material links between them. In *Life Force*, she harmonizes her materials within single works, juxtaposes them in installations and shapes them into a total aesthetic environment. Each piece is worked with tactile intensity by the artist's hand--shaped, etched, carved, scored--and the ultimate beauty of their forms is brought forth through a trial by fire: the translucence and delicacy of thinnest porcelain attained through extremely high kiln temperatures used in the firing, and the nascent rainbow palette hidden in the depths of the copper coaxed out and heightened through the flames of a blowtorch.

In Fhung's early years, there was abundant evidence of her creative talent but little indication of the adventurous, daring spirit that would later infuse both her art and her life. Born in Jakarta into an artistic Chinese-Indonesian family, Fhung was a gifted painter from childhood, winning major art prizes for her

works. Encouraged by her dancer mother, she studied classical Ballet and Indonesian Balinese dance, and excelled academically at school. Her path to success seemed smooth and readymade. Yet entering the Fine Arts Department of Indonesia's prestigious Bandung Institute of Technology in 1988, Fhung was enthralled by the experimental atmosphere of the times, by the art happenings and impromptu installations, and plunged herself into new creative terrains. She joined an art-rock band and performed in local clubs (music has continued to be one of her greatest energetic resources), and became inspired by creative teachers such as the installation artist and activist Tisna Sanjaya and the ceramic artist, critic and curator A.J. Irianto, who she names as one of her most important mentors. Fhung soon decided to pursue ceramics rather than painting in her studies, fascinated by "the physicality, versatility and the seemingly limitless capability of clay," and the way the more direct physical engagement with the material opened up myriad expressive possibilities and new relationship with space, including the use of installation and multiple media in combination with porcelain forms. Fhung's later engagement with copper and other metals came about almost organically, as she began to implement the use of metal wire into her installations and became increasingly drawn to the qualities of different metals, in particular copper, and to both its similarities and its contrasts to working with porcelain.

The subtly luminous palettes of deep brown, green, russet, gold, and silver and the elegant rhythmic flow of the compositional arrangements (often reminiscent of Chinese painting) seen in Fhung's metal 'paintings' and sculptural assemblages, such as *Life Force - Terrain*, *Explore/Escape*, and *InterReaction*, speak to Fhung's original training as a painter. At the same time, the shifting perspectives and unusual framing, from the delicate capture of tiny angels wings in *Ricochet* and the rain-like tracteries of dripped tin in *Terrain*, to the bird's-eye view and the deceptive monumentality of *Explore/Escape II*, also speak to the artist's fascination with nature and landscape photography, developed during her almost daily treks through the mountainous terrain of Hong Kong's Lantau island, where the artist has lived for over a decade.

Reflecting her intense relationship with the mountains, Fhung's most aggressively sculptural work in the show, the breathtaking *Navigating the Landscape of Loss and Grief*, is a three-dimensional abstract mountainscape composed of slender oxidized copper pipes scored and marked with signs of struggle, cataclysm, danger, just as mountains themselves emerged. We see

clearly how the artist has engaged and wrestled with her material: in the sharp pinnacles carved out of the smooth copper surface, in the peaks that can pierce as well as exhilarate, in the textures created from etching, scraping, carving and burning, each scratch and gouge like the marks of an emotional eruption. Yet this is a landscape that has settled back into beauty, after the storm has passed, and in the polished silvery base, smooth and reflective as a mirror, there is space to breathe in, and to contemplate.

Although Fhung does not feel a strong aesthetic link to any artist in particular, there is a kind of passionate female force and visceral connection to the primal powers of nature and the body that are resonant with the work of New York artist Kiki Smith. Smith's work also shares that contrast of refined form and delicacy balanced or undermined by violence that one finds in Fhung's work, albeit in a different expressive and material form.

At the heart of Lie Fhung's *Life Force* is a small, intimate work called *Dormant*, one of the only figurative pieces in the show. Framed in white and lighted from within, small and glowing amidst the powerful mountainscapes and immersive installation that surround it, The dormant figure is the silhouette of a naked woman lying stiffly on her back, against a background of pure white porcelain. Her figure is fashioned of dark copper and secured to the ground of the work with fine copper wire threaded through the porcelain base. Emerging from her chest is a tiny porcelain heart with wings, tenuously tethered to her body by the slimmest of metal threads. Where her body touches the ground, delicate curlicues articulated in thin relief seem to emanate from her, like whorls of energy leaving her body, as though she were slowly dying. Or, conversely, these whorls could represent emanations of the earth's life-force gathering around her where she has fallen, re-energizing her, bringing her back to life. If that were the case, then her heart, suspended in the air where it has been torn away from her body, is poised to return to her. But it is this ambiguity, the paradox of violence and hope that lies just beneath the fragile membrane of the skin, that is at the core of Fhung's work. *Life Force-Dormant* is both the centre and the beginning of all the work that has come from Fhung's hands in the last four years. It is like the space between two breaths, between the exhale and the inhale, containing within it the infinite and critical question of what comes next, after the breath has been knocked out of the body.

In his beautiful poetry cycle, *Duino Elegies*, the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke writes that "Every angel is terrifying," a simple statement that eloquently captures the duality of beauty and of danger that is at the heart of every creative act, whether love-making or art-making. Ultimately, Lie Fhung's *Life Force* is a journey through the terrain of the artist's own life, fraught with the vulnerability of love and the terror of loss, and saved, time and again, by the strange courage of the creative force, and the will not only to survive the cliffs, but to flourish from the soil of life's catastrophes.

LIFE FORCE

a solo exhibition by Lie Fhung

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Dia.Lo.Gue art space,

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liefhung.com