

I and Thou – Anne Clergue Gallery

In its new exhibition, Anne Clergue Galerie is happy to present the photographic series of 16 images from I and Thou by the South Korean artist Mi-Yeon. It was a reading of the book by the philosopher Martin Buber that gave birth to this artistic work. Mi-Yeon questions the relation between the outside world and herself, through a poetic vision informed by a powerful aesthetic sensibility.

A native of Seoul, Mi-Yeon studied photography at the Icart Photo school in Paris. From earliest childhood, she wondered about the place occupied by her own “I” in relation to the world and to others. She was naturally drawn to the work I and Thou by the philosopher Martin Buber, who argues that all our relations lead us into a bonding with God, the eternal “Thou”. Buber considers human beings to be defined by two pairs of words, “I-It” and “I-Thou”.

The first expresses our relation with the other, the fact of revealing, in the form of experience and feeling, how we interact. This is the world as we experience it, with bonds that we can identify and distinguish. As to the “I-Thou”, it expresses a far more spiritual relation between “me and thee”. This view allows an abandonment of the area of feeling, so as to place, at the heart of our reflections, the interaction with another “I”, which could equally well between a person and a tree or between two individuals. It implies a forgetting of oneself, a shift of one’s individual center, in order to focus it on the interaction.

In this reading, the photographer poses a true philosophical conundrum. She uses this decentring of oneself, bringing to light what lies between ourselves and another individual. Mi-Yeon reveals what is usually invisible during our exchanges, whether spiritual or real, with an entity other than our self. It is a profound reflection on the functioning of the human soul in connection with the universe of another dimension, where notions of time and space are blurred. Her photographs are never identifiable portraits. Although the human being often stands at the heart of her images, the play of fuzziness, the blurred, vaguely anthropomorphic contours, never depict a face or a character trait.

One only recognizes the human, like an entity incarnating the “I”, as if the human were the only distinguishable “I”. The use of the personal pronoun thus becomes paradoxical, at once specific to a person and incarnating a set of individuals. These photographs provide an approach to oriental thought, particularly Taoism, where “the other is a variation of myself”. The characters that one perceives project this thought by the orientation of their gaze towards the horizon. This vision, borne to the far distance, guides the viewer to the observation of something unidentifiable. Mi-Yeon releases us from ourselves through this very graphic work. The artist performs a sort of process whereby a print on “washi” paper is re-photographed with a digital camera. Some prints are silk-screened. She obtains a highly graphic rendering, with pastel and luminous colors, marked by strong contrasts.

The grain of the suggests a vague texture as if the relation with the world has materialized. This perceptible approach to an element that we cannot identify with the naked eye elicits a sensitive and poetic perspective on the part of Mi-Yeon. The viewer is completely lost in the midst of this artistic work, inundated by feelings. Her Taoist philosophy reveals a quest for wisdom aimed to achieve harmony. This places the heart and the mind on the path (the Tao), in other words, on the

path of nature. Mi-Yeon causes the innermost nature of the human being to surge through a vision initially focused on herself. Her highly altruistic orientation is inspired by her contemplation of the exchanges with the world that surrounds her. This sensitive outlook, once unveiled, forces contemplation. The photographic series “I and Thou” demands a forgetting of oneself. The mind roams her work, reflecting on the relations that we maintain with others, with nature, and with the world. Mi-Yeon succeeds in transmitting her philosophy, her images take possession of her thought, thereby becoming the incarnation of herself, of her “I”. – Anne Clergue