

A few months ago in April, Singapore went into lockdown in order to slow the spread of COVID-19. With the public libraries and bookstores closed, I evaluated my own books with renewed interest, turning my attention to titles I had not read in a while.

One of the books was *so communication... translating each other's words*, about communication made in relation to work by Clare Charnley, an artist in Leeds.

Thinking of how the last I communicated with her was in 2018, at the exhibition opening organised by ROSL and The Art House, Wakefield where I was artist in residence, I dropped her an email in May, using her book as an excuse to say hello.

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On Sat, May 16, 2020 at 4:06 PM Clare Charnley wrote:

*Hi Joey - so lovely to hear from you. Geoff and I are absolutely fine*

*So glad you like the book Joey. Transcribing the interview with the two Bangladeshi men gave me a feeling of intimacy with the particular cadence of that generation of subcontinent English speakers. I found it very beautiful. I can hear it in my head when I read their words.*

*Do you know This little Art by Kate Briggs? A book about reading and translating - I think you'd love it.*

*best wishes to you and your tidy book shelf*

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Already living with my parents and brother in a 3-bedroom apartment, coupled with my sister stranded with her husband and their newborn unable to return to their home in Shanghai, I would embark on long walks alone during the lockdown.

Leaving the house felt like an act of consideration for everyone. On days when the house felt too suffocating, these walks became almost a moral obligation for everyone's sanity.

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In between, Clare and I kept up a correspondence about our previous art projects, books we were reading, and other things in-between. Elsewhere in Leeds, she was also going on her walks.

On Fri, Jun 5, 2020 at 11:39 PM Clare Charnley wrote:

*I have a suggestion - sort of game we could try to see where it leads... It's to do with intersections of roads, of junctions and it uses the fact that we are both going out for daily walks in semi-shut down cities. The suggestion is that each photographs a place where 2 streets intersect. Each photographs the corner, exactly where the streets join, then blanks out half the photo leaving only one side. The blank area becomes a page for the other to write a fiction, a description, a single word about the unseen street.*

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One of Clare's earlier images to me

Upon receiving this, I wondered if this was a brave, dash-and-go shot to avoid cars, or a careful concentrated process taken on a car-less road.

Like a blindfolded child tempted to cheat in a game by pulling the cloth off, I wanted to type "Monogram Launderette" in Google, Google Maps, and Instant Street View just to find out what was round the corner, or to the right.

I imagine if Clare had taken this image before the lockdown, it would have been a scene peopled by customers in the white space arriving and leaving Monogram Launderette with their bags of clothes.

Perhaps there was plenty of traffic, pedestrians, and children walking up the street that required restriction measures to regulate traffic and safety. Maybe a primary school at the end of the road, with chattering children in their uniforms.

But the scene seemed lonely in its quiet order, even the rubbish was huddled together in a little cluster for company. What else could be round the corner?

Looking at the picture, I was torn about writing after apparitions, reality, or aspirations.

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Clare continued to populate our Dropbox folder with fascinating photographs partially cut off, leaving behind a white space with lines to locate where the corner would start, end, or break away.

I never quite knew where Clare was, where she was standing, or the exact time of the day when she shot those images. There would be promises of exuberance in the corner from the vibrant purple of a butterfly-bush on "Edinburgh Avenue 12". Or the possibility of an extended boredom befitting of a Tuesday afternoon where nothing might happen in the surroundings of a brown-bricked property "4". Over time, people's backs and sometimes, their faces, which were not present before, started to show up in Clare's photographs; an emergence from COVID-19 hibernation, perhaps.

Sometimes, her pictures would look characteristically British, from my own point of view of what *British* means, and at the same time, she could be anywhere.

How can I make the white space come alive, and fight the intuition that the photographs were seducing me to presume? Where should my voice be situated geographically and culturally?

In Clare's night-time scenes of overgrown grass, quiet roads, and cement stained by suspicious streams of liquid, all void of people, I imagined something ominous. Impending arson? A haunting? Of whose ghosts? The one I was raised to fear like the *pontianak*, a vengeful female spirit who died at childbirth, or the literary Canterville sort which I read about but wouldn't believe in?

*The first thing that came to mind was the famous line from Wizard of Oz, "Toto, we're not in Kansas anymore!" Your images are stories that transport me to a different realm- not just a different place, I wrote to her in August.*

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Whilst the pandemic and associated policies, phases, and border controls evolved in their own frenetic manner, my life and Clare's moved along. Outside of our collaboration, some restrictions were lifted where we both live. The tiles in my home popped and cracked, leaving us with dents in the ground with no contractors available for repair. Clare went on a camping trip. My sister and her family left. Clare had a friend in her bubble. The tiles remain dislodged, and the floor is still unrepaired.

It seemed like our collaboration was both touched and also untouched by external forces as our discussions alternated between photos, texts, and various books, one of them a title I hadn't heard of: *The Silent Traveller in The Yorkshire Dales* by Chiang Yee, a Chinese-born writer. The Silent Traveller was a series of books written and illustrated by the author during the period the 1930s to 1950s, based on numerous places, from London, Oxford, Lake District, to Edinburgh.

*We had a copy at home when I was a kid. Unfortunately "The Yorkshire Dales" is one of the few that hasn't been reprinted and copies are VERY expensive, Clare wrote.*

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In September, Clare told me she had ordered a book from the series: A Silent Traveller in London. At my request, she sent me snippets of the writings she found interesting. One of them was about of Chiang Yee visiting the Westminster Cathedral:

*...the lift conductor advised me not to waste a shilling to go up and see nothing, as it was foggy that day. I replied I was just wanting to see nothing... I walked around four sides of the tower and thought I was in heaven." (p.59).*

Reading his words, I thought about of my work with Clare. How sometimes the same thing can be viewed differently and how the scenes in her images, if I imagine hard enough, could be deeply familiar or far removed- the UK, Singapore, the metaphorical not-Kansas.

Like Chiang Yee thought he was in heaven in spite of the lift conductor assuming nothing could be seen in the fog, I saw the infinite possibilities in the space that Clare had carved out in white. In the blankness, anything could be or had been. A sculpture, an eroded sign, the intimations of the moment before or after, and most importantly, people. All that was removed in sight, all the stealthy, troubling, and nondescript

situations of people and the everyday during the pandemic, I imitated them into words, and homed my imagination into the space.

6 months on after my first e-mail to Clare in April, this is one of my longer collaborations, and the first in which I had not met my working partner throughout. Writing to situate Clare's images and to fill in the blanks feels creating an adaptation of a folklore or fairytale: the start is somewhat familiar, but there is a twist, something unknown, surprising.

Art, its process, and workings can sometimes have a way of revealing itself in its hiding place, telling the artist what the work is about, even before I am able to do so.

Whenever I saw the new photos that Clare had uploaded, I would read them like a wordless book, to which I imagined a narrative of. Her images felt like the start of a tale, whilst my job was to play the role of a deeply attentive, and also inventive listener.

Up to this point in time, and possibly further, I have not seen or requested to see the missing parts of the photographs, in spite of a natural curiosity. Clare must have also wondered the same, this conceptual hide-and-seek, because she mentioned towards the end of our work that it was something she had been puzzling about, but had the thought to keep it secret a bit longer. Of our work together, she told me that the jumps, between what is there in her very familiar surroundings, and the writings, as intriguing. *I imagine walking round my area of Leeds with you to all the places you have responded to*, she wrote.

It is a walk I hope to take with Clare, outside of the text, in all her photos some time, one day.