

## **Puzzles, Tangrams, and the Opened Boxes: Plain Rules of Shiao-Peng Chen's Paintings**

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Shiao-Peng Chen's works unwittingly lead the viewers to look for clues of various abstract traditions in modern paintings. The austere simplicity with which those paintings are produced demonstrates their intimate relationship with geometric abstraction, Minimalism, Suprematism, and Concrete Art. However, whether Chen's exploration is simply continuous with these traditions is still a question worth pondering. As a matter of fact, as long as we attempt to establish a critical perspective, we encounter this question immediately. Before we could really get into Chen's paintings, we must ask ourselves: how could we distance ourselves from the temptation of the epistemic question, the inescapable question of the whole "abstract traditions"? The distance is critical in the process of viewing Chen's works.

In terms of visual art, the whole series of Chen's works undoubtedly belong to an extreme type of pure geometry. Chen employs only sets of rectangles and triangles in her paintings. They are constructed by using regular divisions in halves and thirds. The focus is on the variations of forms functionally operated through contrasts, deductions, compensations and repetitions. They follow strict rationalism and any impulsive emotion is highly repressed. Not even a curve indicative of weakness appears in Chen's works.

Whenever we emphasize too much on styles, we would foreclose the discussion and hastily conclude on the conventions of styles in modern art. The discussion could never go beyond the descriptions of geometric abstraction. What need to be further investigated are the strategies of art making behind the style, and this is the main concern of Shiao-Peng Chen's art. Through further investigation into this, our anxiety over having fun out of the quite insipid geometric abstraction would be alleviated, and so is our doubt about how the young artist could be satisfied at all with submitting herself to such strong emotional repression. Standing in front of Chen's paintings, we cannot but keep wondering.

Chen's strategies of art making seem to be confined to several rules, and possibilities are grown only out of the rules. These "rules" are neither complex nor mysterious. Instead, they are quite pithy, and surround purely on explorations of visual composition. All the possible specimens of patterns are developed according to the restriction of the rules. Chen's works are like the records of this process. What is worth our attention is that instead of indulging herself in the limitless pursuit of expression, Chen's works always reveal her submission to rules. In other words, we have more "restraint" than "indulgence" in Chen's works. Even if each of her works has its difference, these differences are possibilities confined under sets of rules.

The series of obvious “restraint” suggest the existence of rules in Chen’s paintings. It is the sets of rules and restraints that are the main concern of Chen’s paintings. Therefore, the appropriate questions here would be: what are the rules being set up and why are the rules set up? The question could even be: why is it necessary to comply with the rules at all? As we shall see, it is evident that Chen’s works follow a set of “rules of wholeness”. In her statement, Chen refers it as the concept of “Gestalt”.

The so-called “wholeness” is after all too general a concept. It must be specifically pointed out that Chen’s “rules of wholeness” is a rather submissive gesture toward the “wholeness”. This is demonstrated through the conceptual applications of puzzles, tangrams, and the opened boxes.

Puzzles divide a rectangle into several equal-sized parts, and the piecing together of the parts confirm the existence of the rectangle, instead of the other way around. Like tangrams, puzzles could be arranged into irregular patterns, but the final composition is still the rectangle. All of the variations never deviate from the basic restriction—parts do not supersede wholeness; they submit to it. In Chen’s paintings, each color segment complies with the premise of the rectangle. The mystery resides merely in the various arrangements and compositions.

Besides, the relationship among the compositions of each work is not voluntary for Chen. Quite to the contrary, they obey a certain order of thinking. The composition of the work that follows takes the previous one as the starting point, whether by extending or partially altering it. A certain kind of continuity is therefore established among the series of works with the beginning, ending, and the movements of viewing, like a narrative of variations of forms and patterns. “It is like story-telling,” Chen describes her practices of painting as such.

Besides puzzles, Chen also illustrates her art by painting opened boxes. Although they look like products of random compositions of rectangles and diagonals, they suggest a foldable space. This is resonant with her art both in function and logic. Chen’s recent work painted directly on the walls demonstrates the suggestive foldable space to a great extent that she even adds dotted lines to indicate folding, and puts crosses to indicate the bases of the boxes. The sets of forms all submit to the rules of the opened boxes, but the final organic geometric images (birds, or human heads, for example) depend on the individual’s capability of imagination.

## II

Chen submits to the rules of wholeness which are the premise that constitute her works of puzzles, tangrams, and opened boxes. She seeks restricted possibilities. This shapes the artist's main strategy of art making. Just as Chen's works are always confined to the idea of wholeness, it is intriguing that Chen creates her art with restrictions of the rules she gives her art. In a word, the artist does not do what she thinks about; her art is dictated by rules.

Although art activities are more or less circumscribed by existing sensual or conceptual mechanisms, epistemic systems, and artistic conventions, the establishment of plain rules and a kind of submission to the point of even being comfortable with disciplines are essential in Chen's process of creation. To put it another way, without rules, these visual changes will lose their connections with logic and intellectual thinking, and they would become nothing more than purely sensual and aesthetic experiences. The more accustomed we are with the aesthetic values given by the long history of geometric abstraction, the more likely it is for the purely aesthetic geometric abstraction to lapse into a disposable status.

Owing to it, Chen's geometric abstract paintings rely on the intellectual thinking to support them. In the meanwhile, to ensure their qualities, astute and challenging thinking must be sought along the way to prevent her works from suffering another round of nostalgic consumption.

The above discussion allows us to re-define a quite out-dated statement such as "the game of colors and forms," which has long been used to describe abstract paintings but is nevertheless unreliable. This statement leads to illusions about "freedom" and "voluntary choice". The point that is being missed here is that "games" require a well-targeted goal and disciplines, to say the least. In essence, games are nothing more than a set of rules. Games do not allow running wild. Only by abiding by the rules could the game go on. It needs to be distinguished from playing around. In fact, Chen's works touch on the necessity of restriction as the nature of games, and not its unbridled freedom.

## III

If such art arouses our attention, this is due to the artist's confirmation and submission to plain rules. However, the paradigm becomes an anomaly in the collective imagination of the contemporary art that has been claimed to be totally "emancipated". It is a time that young artists are up against the most chaotic age in art history where rules are no longer working. Situated in an atmosphere where indulgent expression is the mainstream, Chen's art

demonstrates the extreme of austerity and self-restraint. She sets up her rules, which renders art to restore to a condition where her works are strictly confined to rules. Her art is like playing chess on the checkerboard in which all of the combats, negotiations and reconciliations do not exceed the boundary of the checkerboard.

On the surface, Shiao-Peng Chen's works remind us of Greenbergian Formalism. Formalism aims at establishing the nature of paintings, and follows its faith in purification, that is, its belief in the return to plane and rectangular framework, and yet Chen's works has subtle difference from it. The rules will either be set up by the individual artist or will exist solely for the creation in the particular place and at the particular moment. The artist sets up his/her own rules not for solving the questions of art left by people of former times, nor for pursuing the nature of art. The goal is to experiment the conditions of the art-object and different rules will result in different conditions. Shiao-Peng Chen's art is a series of games of experimentations; however, it is also a series of submission to rules. Only by exerting self-restraint can games be carried out, even if it is only minimal disciplines. In front of Chen's paintings, we want to make every effort to see through the surface of the seemingly insipid geometric patterns, and gain insight into the fun of constantly changing the game rules.