

Entangling ground

Essay by Dr Jenny McFarlane

2020 was a year for meditation on the importance of the local – our friends, colleagues and hometown. This exhibition is the opportunity to celebrate two bodies of work that were undertaken one day at a time, news bulletin to news bulletin, lockdown to lockdown. eX de Medici's intensely detailed paintings of the microscopic moths shared with the artist by scholars and friendsⁱ are markers for the mindfulness, friendship, and art that sustained many of us during this difficult year – notwithstanding their heavy payloads of rage. But in eX de Medici's hands the moth in *Covid's Eyes* with its ephemeral sky-blue wings outstretched and unfamiliar cargo is an elegant reminder of how the intensely local and very far away became entangled during that intense period. Chaos sown by the whisper of moth wings at different corners of the globe released cyclones. Another moth stands for the efforts made by different leaders to manage the situation.



In *Calumny*, the stars and stripes are as lifeless as the tiny moth. But in this and other collaborative works the complexities start to multiply. Ex de Medici's painterly and neighbourly conversations with Wu Wei

Rong have layered the work with a quotation from Niccolò Machiavelli in not one but two Chinese scripts; classical and modern – enabling a poetic double meaning. Here, Machiavelli's 1517 warnings about the injury to good governance from falsehoods and conspiracy theories acquires a gloss referencing the poisoning seeds of fear and growing hostility.ⁱⁱ The layering enabled by such calligraphic interplay make Wu Wei Rong's work a perfect counterpoint to eX de Medici's fierce watercolours.



Each week during the last year these two friends have met and worked together, watched the world rehearse the vocabulary and grammar of power, cried havoc and sought balance. Two years ago eX de Medici and Wu Wei Rong travelled together in China and collaborated on an 11-metre-long work, *The farmer and the foreigner*.ⁱⁱⁱ These two exhibitions extend this conversation about tradition, culture and, inevitably, power. Wei Rong identifies with the ancient Chinese cultural traditions of her birthplace, embodying in her work and life many of the tensions of migrant experience. As an artist her commitment is to a traditional daily practice of spiritual study, music, friendship, painting and calligraphy, as constitutive parts of a good life. One small work (*Emergence I*), easy to overlook, is a meditation on the butterfly's life cycle; that from difficulties come transformational experiences; a message of hope – an important point of reference for 2020.



However, within Wei Rong's aesthetic framework this meditation on the principle of balance is only one dimension of the work, the abstract marks on paper are equally valued for their capacity to communicate through gesture, passion and restraint, light and shade, the emphatic and retiring voice of the artist. Wei Rong's quiet study and meditation on a text, read and reread over millennia, is released in the performance of the script, with the personhood of the maker the vehicle for the remaking of the wisdom.



In another collaborative work, *Terrain*, eX de Medici and Wu Wei Rong take Sun Tzu's *The Art of war* as a point of reference.¹ Like Machiavelli's later work, Sun Tzu's 2500-year-old text lays out the vocabulary and grammar of power. They have selected for this work his description of the terrains on which military engagements might play out. 'Entangling ground' is Sun Tzu's term for a terrain that "can be abandoned but which is hard to reoccupy", where, in the crazy tango of strategic retreat and ambitious advance, the two parties are locked together in a precarious and everchanging balance. Now may be the time to ask whether the terms of engagement of the entangled parties; our friends, colleagues and hometowns, are drawn along party, nationalist, or economic lines – or some less transparent but equally transformative terrain.

Dr Jenny McFarlane
Canberra 2021

ⁱ Dr Marianne Horak and Dr Ted Edwards' work at the CSIRO National Insect Collection has long been a source of inspiration to eX de Medici.

ⁱⁱ Niccolò Machiavelli & Bernard Crick (2003). *The discourses of N.Machiavelli*. Lond : Penguin p. 128 ff

NB This text is written in 'classical' stone drum script, a calligraphic form, proficiency in which is regarded as a highly polished skill.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Collaboration Farmer and Foreigner*, (2019) Sullivan +Strumpf, Sydney.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sun Tzu "The art of war" in *The seven military classics* (2017). Lond.: Arcturus pp 143, 153, 173, 192