

Conversing among, around, and with Cecil Mariani's drawings

by Akmalia Rizqita "Chita", Grace Samboh,
with Lisabona Rahman, Ening Nurjanah, and (let's just call them) K

[About this text]

This text contains conversations between Chita and Grace who arranged and displayed Cecil's works together. The text is tasked with introducing the exhibition, accompanying the audience as they view the works. As they arranged the artworks, and imagining what kind of "introduction" ought to be delivered alongside the display, we asked several of Cecil's close friends to look at the works with us.

From Popie's to Levant

The texts we used to send each other, every morning, the moments we just woke up:

Q: Wes tangi? (You awake?)

A: Uwes (Yes)

Q: Sarapan yuk? (Breakfast?)

A: - Ok, tak salin sek (Let me change)

- Ok, aku mudun (I'm coming down)

Then we would walk into this small nice breakfast café, in our neighbourhood, at Cikini V, under the commuter line railway. A waffle, or a pancake, and an omelette for two. A cup of white coffee for me and a cup of tea for her. Some cigarettes.

These conversations still happen, despite the lesser intensity, the different breakfast places, the different menus. We have arrived at: Two black coffees, one salad Chevre Chaud, Shasouka, some bread. And, no more cigarettes!

From Central to South! Brekky-time with Cecil is always special.

Jakarta, June 2023

Ening Nurjanah

[GRS]

When Cecil's drawings came from the framers'. I thought we would be frowning over them for a long time. Because we had to choose: Which do we put on display? Why? Why not? There's a kind of burden to give justifications over our choices. Curatorial justifications! Haha.

[ARC]

The first thing that came to our heads was to group them according to size, similarity of medium, and colour, to then be "filtered". When we saw them in a row, we were blown away! Not only due to the quantity, consistency, and Cecil's perseverance with her drawing routine, all became so visible. As a side note: There are dozens of other drawings that Cecil didn't bring over here!

[GRS]

Blown away! Yes! Completely! Even when we were grouping them according to form, we also thought about what kind of spatial experience we want to build for the exhibition audience. How the works are experienced inside the exhibition space, one by one, one next to the other, as a group across another group, and so on. I'm not sure whether these thoughts are a curse (since we are the organisers of the space) or a blessing (as we are positioned to put the works in the best condition possible). But, what is "best"? Why is this the "best" and that one isn't? Anyway, the process of grouping the works was done without checking the title of the works, the year of making, and so forth. So, naturally, these drawings are arranged based on colour gradation and the tendencies of the line. In fact, this is almost exactly how it is now in the exhibition space, isn't it...

Initially, we thought we were going to select—as commonly expected from curatorial work, which is the labour of selecting artworks. As in selecting one, two or three works that represent a particular tendency of form. And the rest we put in storage, as in not displayed. After all the work is lined up, WOW! Like you said, Chit, what immediately became so apparent was how routinely Cecil draws. Her practice of drawing. There is a kind of calm, serenity, or relief if you use your words, that we can see from the works. Maybe because in routines patterns emerge, so we become comfortable, this is nice, because we are drawn into its simplicity, its habits... There is a feeling that this is really its nature...

[ARC]

Curiously, Cecil's drawings also brought us to try new types of freedom. This is the first time that we displayed artworks in RUBANAH beyond the limits that we create ourselves. This time we don't see pillars and columns within the space as "partitions", as we do with other panels that we usually find in other exhibition spaces. We treat RUBANAH's walls as boxes, if you will. Pillar and columns become a kind of limitation.

[GRS]

So often we create these limitations, then put the blame on school, theory, knowledge, discipline, industry, modernity or whatever kind of "school of thought" that acts as a kind of boundary! Haha. Then

we work as if to achieve some kind of freedom. Instead, to be free (may be) a state of mind! Why even believe in those boundaries in the first place? Does anyone force us to acknowledge or believe in those boundaries?

Many of us know Cecil as wearing many different “hats”. She’s a graphic designer, teaches at the Institute of the Arts Jakarta, involved in the founding and activities of different kinds of organisations such as: School of Women’s Thought, a collective for workers in the media and creative industries SINDIKASI, Prakerti Collective Intelligence—a cooperative platform that bridges between academic work, business, activism, and Jakarta Arts Council (2020-2023). Because of all these social roles (and responsibilities), it becomes “easy” for us to say that in these drawings, Cecil is free...

[ARC]

As a graphic designer, and an organiser, Cecil is used to a methodical approach: researching, measuring, arranging, considering, and so on. Her work always encounters others’ expectations and needs. In her drawings, she lets go of these habits. She draws for her own benefit, and we can sense that relief. This sense of relief seems to come from there—from the freedom to act unlike in her other roles. And her drawing practice seems to be something that is part of her daily life, at least lately...

[GRS]

“Relief” is not a keyword that we often use when we talk about artworks in general. Why does this word come up from looking at, enjoying, and arranging Cecil’s work? When we talk about drawing we would talk about lines, figures, characters... When we talk about feelings and emotions, what should come up would be anger, bitterness, anxieties, or on the other side of the scale, beauty, eroticism, sexy, gentle... Especially since the choice of medium and the way to apply her drawing tools, it would seem a step away from perceiving Cecil’s works as dark, gloomy, depressing, and as such.

The routine of drawing, Cecil’s drawing practice, we have attempted to present them in the exhibition space by displaying the works closely side-by-side quite a lot. I feel like I need to question the idea of “darkness” itself. Is it merely an impression, since the works use charcoal or drawing tools that are black in colour and immediately be seen as dark? If we follow the lines, and not the colour, aren’t we faced with a certain grace? Even, conviction. Because it’s as if Cecil’s lines always know where they are meant to go. “I draw following the lines,” Cecil said. Why lines? What do they want? We can also think that it’s up to Cecil or whomever drew the line. Cecil’s short statement, in my opinion, can also mean that she doesn’t have any particular goal, let alone ambitions. She draws to draw, not to present images that stand for any specific ideas.

In *mother to mother: haptic kinesthesia* (2023), there are two people standing back against each other, their faces avoiding the other, disinterested... This drawing takes me to one of the first impressions of seeing Cecil’s work, about how fiercely emotional they are. At Galeri Kertas, in 2018, I was amazed by Cecil’s drawings that were dominated by

strokes of an intensely black colour. Then, I thought this deep black was incredibly morose. In my current emotional state, I want to enjoy Cecil's works. I was to move away from the darkness of the use of black as a colour in Cecil's drawings.

In life, where we are often doubtful, angry, perhaps forgetful of the things we have to be grateful for, I think, Cecil's drawings are a reminder that we still have a heart, in all its various forms of emotions. Cecil draws when her heart feels empty, sad, angry, doubting, happy, or even just to fill up spare time. Not because she has to make artworks. I commend Cecil's way of working that diligently expresses the turbulence of emotions, recording them. Whether this diligence is intentional or not, for sure, in my view, these drawings may represent many people's emotional conditions, as they do for me. Even if she suddenly stops, she will take this lightly. Because of this, in some of her drawings, there would be impressions of being unfinished. I think this is a characteristic of Cecil's aesthetic.

Jakarta, June 2023

(let's call them) K

[ARC]

Cecil's drawings are located all over the place, the figures or forms are often nameless, many times it's unclear what kind of creatures they are—though we may recognize some of them as human figures. Parts of bodies stack up, strands of hair falling here and there, they seem to be moving... Wait, wait. Before we discuss drawing per drawing, perhaps we may start from drawing as an act that Cecil chooses. There is an immediacy in drawing that seems to comfort Cecil. In the process, Cecil's interest in materials also pushes her to draw—her fondness of texture and colour of the boards that she uses for the work *silver shadow series* (2022) and *yellow shadow series* (2022) that are displayed in the gallery, for instance. Also the transparency of the ink, the blurriness of the pastel, the intensity of charcoal... The grace in controlling her drawing equipment often fools us into thinking that they're something else. I'm often curious, what does she use here?

In the work *grieving path series 2: Dear, Amygdala* (2023), for instance, briefly I thought it was pencil, but it turns out that Cecil uses black ink mixed with water so the colour has a grey tone that veers towards being transparent. We almost thought that the work of coastal *kinesthesia* (2023) was drawn using markers, and it turns out to be ink. This is also the case with the works that have elements of yellow and pink (but really, magenta) that we thought was watercolour, which turn out to be ink.

[GRS]

The parts that Chita refers to as "I thought" is really interesting for me as I don't have a drawing practice—yes, yes I agree that everyone can draw, but that doesn't necessarily mean that it becomes a practice, let alone a skill that becomes embodied in everyone, does it? Hehe.

[ARC]

Right? Cecil's drawings remind me of doodles that I often do when I'm in moments of contemplation. It gets me thinking about how difficult it must be to really draw without designing as Cecil has done. Many draw with a blueprint or a clear goal in mind, so they can be right or wrong, finished or unfinished. When we're talking about an artist's practice, we're often tempted to compartmentalise it into "phases" or periods... Whereas, Cecil can return to a drawing that she once attempted to finish with such ease - or perhaps more accurately, she stopped working on it - then she added a few elements, before moving on to another drawing, or to start a completely new drawing with a different medium. Everything happens at the same time. To be able to draw like Cecil, there is a sensitivity that is needed, that must come from an experience of a lifetime of drawing, and certainly not many are able to achieve this.

[GRS]

In this exhibition there are two drawings that tend to be different because of the medium. In terms of approach, of making, both are still drawings. The first is drawing that Cecil made on plasterboard and the second, the print work. *Weeping in plain public* (2020) was drawn at Pasar Seni Ancol in front of an audience weekend-ing on the hot, northern coastal part of Jakarta. In the beginning, there was a member of the audience who kept asking Cecil, "What is the meaning behind your work?" Cecil asked in return, "What do you think it means?" Meaning, intention, story-telling, is never a starting point for Cecil's drawing practice— in writing titles, or when she is asked to give some sort of narrative about her work, her stance is usually retroactive, she becomes an audience of her own work, then building a story from what is visible and what is also entwined with her experience during the making of the drawing.

From this event, and the fact that Cecil hangs her work in her house, after which she brought them to the gallery, I'd like to underline the lightness and grace of Cecil's approach to drawing. Routine, yes.

Ritual(istic), yes. But not necessarily in solitude. The lithography process allows Cecil to draw in the way she usually draws, with various charcoal, ink and brushes, alongside her way of creating lines with these tools—the difference being that for limestone in lithography, the drawing tools are oil based. In her notes for this work, Cecil thanked Devi Febrianto, Johana Dewa, tim studio Defto Printmaking, Ening Nurjanah, dan Goenawan Mohamad. The first three allowed the possibility of printmaking work that goes beyond someone's physical labour on top of paper. The last two, Ening and GM, facilitated other necessities that Cecil needed in order to experiment with this new medium.

From a technical perspective, *dark at the rim of language* (2023) began from work that was similar to Cecil's drawing practice. The difference is, there needs to be limestone, its drawing tools, and the print machine. So, even though the drawings are made in a process that has become so embodied in Cecil— as she has drawn since she was young—the rituals are different. If usually Cecil pores over paper, getting drawing tools that she wants to use or what to experiment with, finding a table to draw, immersed in her own company, this, aside from when she was drawing, all the steps needed the role of other people. In Cecil's other work, as a graphic designer, as a lecturer, as an organiser, she is used to working with many people. The lithography work can be seen as an event when Cecil continues as she usually does with the way she draws with other people, along with their responses to the work.

A short note for Friend C

i'm truly happy with you that your exhibition approaching

the last time we talked, just us
everything was choked up, crammed
just as the traffic jam that entrapped us that afternoon

'where do you feel most relieved?' i asked
'when i can draw.' you replied

i'm truly happy with you that your exhibition is approaching
may your space continue to broaden, you thoughts at ease

Berlin, June 2023

Lisabona Rahman