



**YANYUN
CHEN**

STPI
CREATIVE WORKSHOP & GALLERY

About the Artist

Dr. Yanyun Chen (Singapore) is a visual artist, researcher, and professor. She runs a drawing, new media and installation practice. Her works delve into the aesthetic, cultural and technological inheritances on one's body, unravelling fictional and philosophical notions of embodiment, heritage, and legacies. These interdisciplinary works are grounded in the physicality of human and botanical forms.

She builds two trains of thought throughout her artistic works: *on bodies and on constructs*: In the former, she research stories of childhood discipline, cultural wounds, dowry traditions, hereditary scars, philosophies of nudities, and etymology, and investigate stories as a skin which we wear and conditions of intergenerational pain; in the latter, she questions the disassociating states of representing and memorializing artifice in artistic endeavours as opposed to being present to the experience of witnessing withering and death of what is outside and within oneself.

She received the prestigious Singapore National Arts Council Young Artist Award (2020) and ArtOutreach IMPART Visual Artist Award (2019). Her works were also awarded the Prague International Indie Film Festival Q3 Best Animation Award (2020), National Youth Film Awards Best Art Direction Award (2019), Singapore Art Museum President's Young Talents People's Choice Award (2018), Japan Media Arts Festival (2012) and Lee Kuan Yew Gold Medal Award (2009). She is listed on Tatler's Asia's Most Influential: The Culture List (2021).

Her recent works include Scar Writings (2024), Gently Savage (2022), Furious Fires (2020-), False Truths (2020), Women in Rage (2019), Stories of a woman and her dowry (2019), The scars that write us (2018), Skinning Nudity (2018) and Flower Flights (2018). Her works have been exhibited internationally. She has attended artist residencies at NTU Centre for Contemporary Art (Singapore, 2023), Tyrone Guthrie Centre (Ireland, 2022), HANGAR (Portugal, 2022) and STPI (Singapore, 2021).

Chen is currently in between cities: Singapore and Boston, and a Professor of the Practice at School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Tufts University.





At STPI

For Chen, “departure” was a main theme that surfaced during her residency with STPI. “Departure” here not only refers to leaving something behind but of journeying down new paths as well, both conceptually and materially. Her STPI works take on an ephemeral-like quality, in obvious contrast to her usually-dense charcoal drawings which she is highly-skilled in and well-recognised for.

In the span of three weeks, the artist was impelled to experiment beyond the familiar due to working with foreign methods and collaborators. Chen, therefore, aimed to push each piece further and further in a generative process, with each being a departure from her previous practice, the previous test prints, and even the previous copy within the same series of work.

This can be especially attributed to Chen’s unfamiliarity with the world of print and papermaking, which meant having to improvise based on what was placed in front of her. In turn, it was also an act of improvisation for the workshop team as the artist put forth ideas that went against technical conventions.





Wing Koh

Wing Koh

About the Works

Of significance is the use of the watermarking technique. For the artist, it was the first time where she had worked closely *with* and *within* the material of paper itself, rather than just as a surface to coat charcoal on.

Watermarking is where an image is created as part of the paper by strategically varying the thickness of its depth during the wet phase of papermaking. The difference in thickness would thus produce ranges in translucency, with the translucency being the 'drawing' material. This was a decidedly 'opposite' process from her charcoal drawings, where the watermarking/drawing 'peers into' the inner world of the material, in comparison to 'bringing out' a subject from the paper through the process of addition (charcoal on paper). Such a 'peering into' is made even more obvious through the masterful creation of the mulberry paper—fragile, translucent and materially suggestive.

For some pieces, the silhouettes of flora, as in *Seen, screen, scatter*, seem to be manoeuvring their outlines all over the surface of the paper. They interact with light, for when light hits, these ghostly traces glow just a little bit more, and when otherwise, they recede into the shadows again, never fully showing their true form. Barred from full access, these other lives seem wholly inscrutable to our human gaze.

Other more abstract renditions of the watermark, such as with *Paper spine*, emits a lure that is texturally tantalising: one is pulled into the fine details, where the undulating terrain may be suggestive of mountain ridges, the human skin, or even just the life of the transformed mulberry itself. We may find ourselves craving to enter this illusive setting, but frustratingly, we can only vaguely peer into it from its surface.





Seen, screen, scatter

CY21-16

2021

STPI handmade mulberry paper
with watermarks

180 x 55 cm each (artwork)

189.5 x 118 x 6 cm (opened)

189.5 x 66 x 12 cm (closed)

Unique



Seen, screen, scatter (detail), 2021, STPI handmade mulberry paper with watermarks, 180 x 55 cm each



Silence, healing (detail), 2021, Mulberry charcoal and bark on STPI handmade paper with watermarks, 100 x 45 cm



Silence, healing

CY21-14

2021

Mulberry charcoal and bark on STPI
handmade paper with watermarks

100 x 45 cm (artwork)

111 x 57.5 x 6 cm (framed)

Unique



A changing stream

CY21-15

2021

Mulberry charcoal and bark on STPI
handmade paper with watermarks

60 x 78 cm (artwork)

71 x 88.5 x 6 cm (framed)

Unique



A changing stream (detail), 2021, Mulberry charcoal and bark on STPI handmade paper with watermarks, 60 x 78 cm



Paper spine

CY21-11

2021

STPI handmade mulberry paper
with watermarks

28 x 98 cm (artwork)

39.5 x 107 x 6 cm (framed)

Unique

Paper spine (detail), 2021, STPI handmade mulberry paper with watermarks, 28 x 98 cm

The sentiment of “departures” finds another articulation in series that are organised as variations. Indeed, it is the rhythm and structure which “variations” possess in the domain of printmaking that allows for a lyrical and technical elucidation of “departures”. Each variation is not dissimilar to one another, yet none are exactly the same; each can therefore be considered a sustained departure from the other, as in *The necessity for departures* and *Branch*. Note how the imprinted image remains, but its elements deviate as you peer from detail to detail. Further, the artist notes how “the production process was iterative, with each an answer to a previous question”. In this case, we may see how her each of her STPI work are indeed a variation from one to the other.





The necessity for departures

CY21-2A

Variation 1 of 6



The necessity for departures

CY21-2B

Variation 2 of 6



The necessity for departures

CY21-2C

Variation 3 of 6



The necessity for departures

CY21-2D

Variation 4 of 6

2021

Hardground etching, spit bite aquatint,
offset lithography and chalk on STPI
handmade mulberry paper with
watermarks

76 x 53.5 cm each (artwork)

85.5 x 63.5 x 4 cm each (framed)

2021

Hardground etching, spit bite aquatint,
offset lithography and chalk on STPI
handmade mulberry paper with
watermarks

76 x 53.5 cm each (artwork)

85.5 x 63.5 x 4 cm each (framed)



The necessity for departures (detail), 2021, Hardground etching, spit bite aquatint, offset lithography and chalk on STPI handmade mulberry paper with watermarks, 76 x 53.5 cm



The necessity for departures
CY21-2E
Variation 5 of 6



The necessity for departures
CY21-2F
Variation 6 of 6

2021
Hardground etching, spit bite aquatint,
offset lithography and chalk on STPI
handmade mulberry paper with
watermarks
76 x 53.5 cm each (artwork)
85.5 x 63.5 x 4 cm each (framed)





Branch
CY21-1A
Variation 1 of 8



Branch
CY21-1B
Variation 2 of 8



Branch
CY21-1C
Variation 3 of 8



Branch
CY21-1D
Variation 4 of 8

2021
Hardground etching, offset lithography,
charcoal and chalk on STPI handmade
mulberry paper
99 x 28 cm each (artwork)
107 x 38 x 4 cm each (framed)

2021
Hardground etching, offset lithography,
charcoal and chalk on STPI handmade
mulberry paper
99 x 28 cm each (artwork)
107 x 38 x 4 cm each (framed)



Branch
CY21-1E
Variation 5 of 8



Branch
CY21-1F
Variation 6 of 8



Branch
CY21-1G
Variation 7 of 8



Branch
CY21-1H
Variation 8 of 8

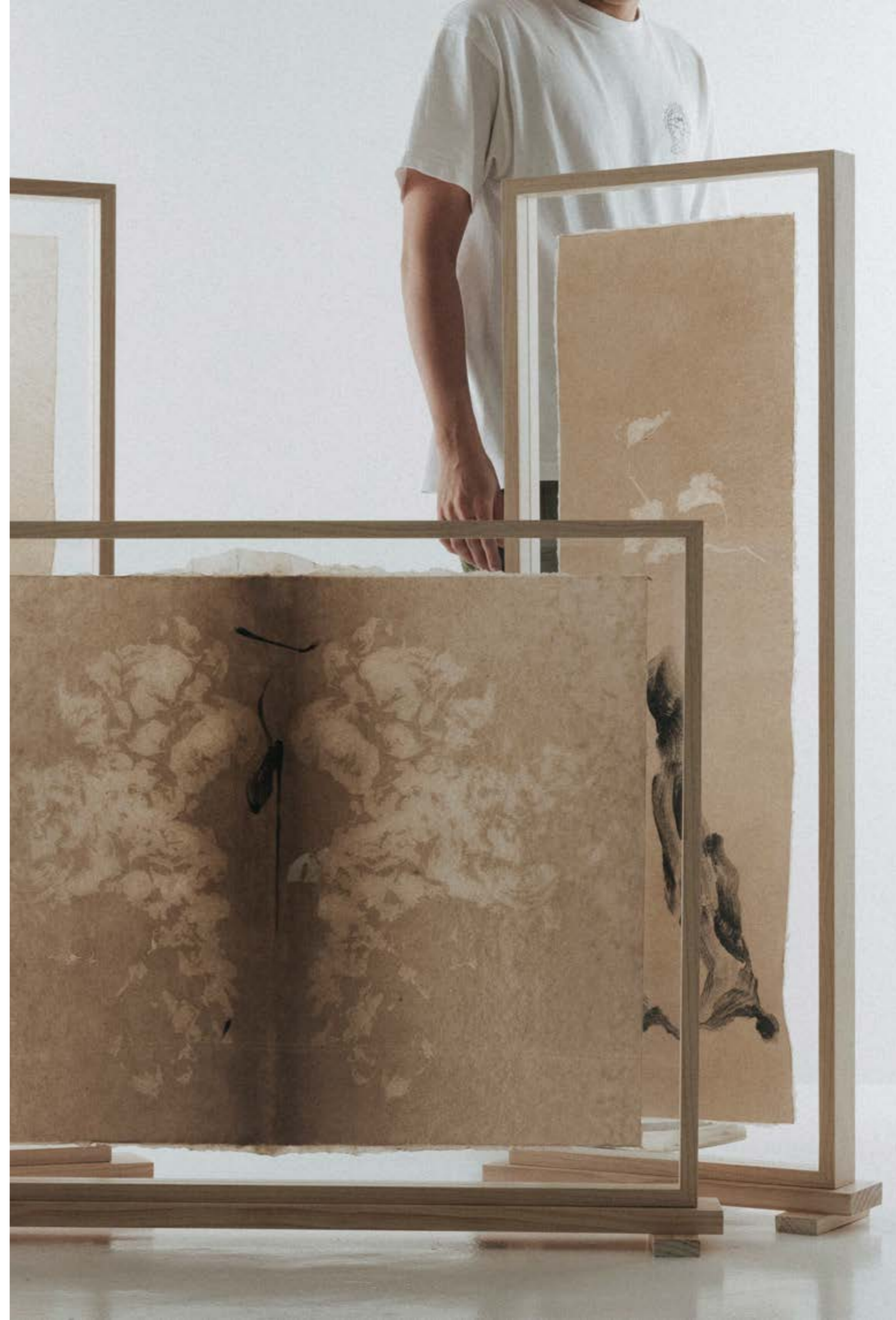
2021
Hardground etching, offset lithography,
charcoal and chalk on STPI handmade
mulberry paper
99 x 28 cm each (artwork)
107 x 38 x 4 cm each (framed)

2021
Hardground etching, offset lithography,
charcoal and chalk on STPI handmade
mulberry paper
99 x 28 cm each (artwork)
107 x 38 x 4 cm each (framed)



Peppered throughout her STPI body of work are references to classical aesthetics and/or traditions; in particular, what the artist has termed “Chinese Aesthetics”. Take for example how *Whisper, mulberry dream* bears similarities to the *shan shui* painting form, or the scroll-like format of *Fly, mulberry ash*, *Lifting a page* and *Paper spine*. Whereas for *Branch*, Chen had consciously mingled the references of the image being, first, a mulberry branch (the early incarnation of the mulberry material) and second, the Chinese character for “one” (“一”)—both of which signals to the idea of origin, a return to roots.

In the artist’s words, “I realise more and more how the stories I choose to tell through my works have a lot to do with my difficulties with tradition, both in form and subject matter. On one hand, we celebrate traditions as markers for our identity and as a way of honouring our value systems, lineage and ancestry; on the other hand, traditions are also limitations, structures, and barriers. They are gatekeepers for what is currently acceptable.”





Whisper, mulberry dream

CY21-08

2021

Mulberry charcoal and bark on STPI
handmade paper with watermarks

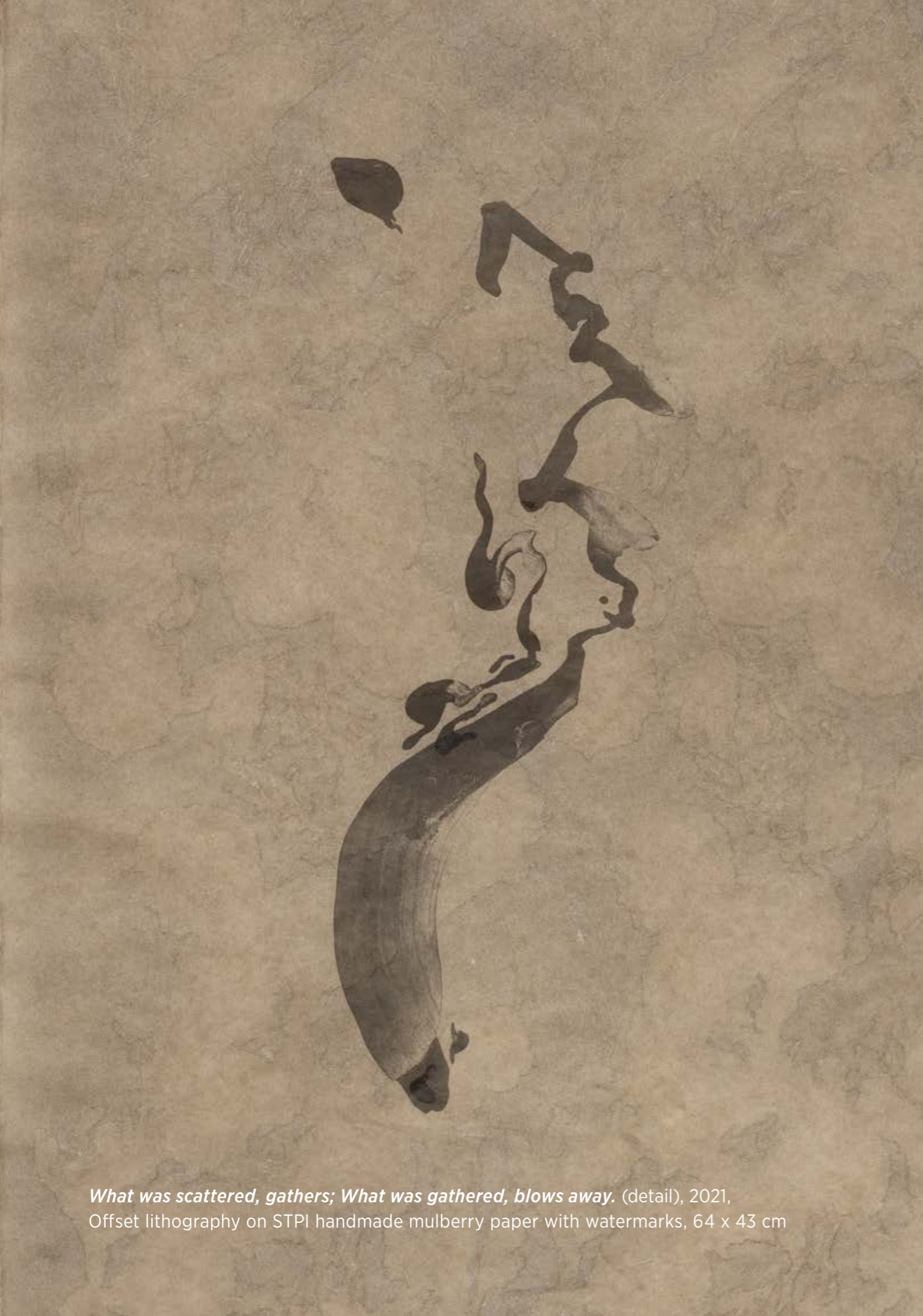
99 x 27.5 cm (artwork)

110.5 x 39.5 x 6 cm (framed)

Unique



Whisper, mulberry dream (detail), 2021, Mulberry charcoal and bark on STPI handmade
paper with watermarks, 99 x 27.5 cm



What was scattered, gathers; What was gathered, blows away. (detail), 2021,
Offset lithography on STPI handmade mulberry paper with watermarks, 64 x 43 cm



**What was scattered, gathers;
What was gathered, blows away.**
CY21-03

2021
Offset lithography on STPI handmade
mulberry paper with watermarks (diptych)

64 x 43 cm each (artwork)
Variation 1 of 3



**What was scattered, gathers;
What was gathered, blows away.**

CY21-04

2021

Offset lithography on STPI handmade
mulberry paper with watermarks (diptych)

64 x 43 cm each (artwork)

Variation 2 of 3



**What was scattered, gathers;
What was gathered, blows away.**

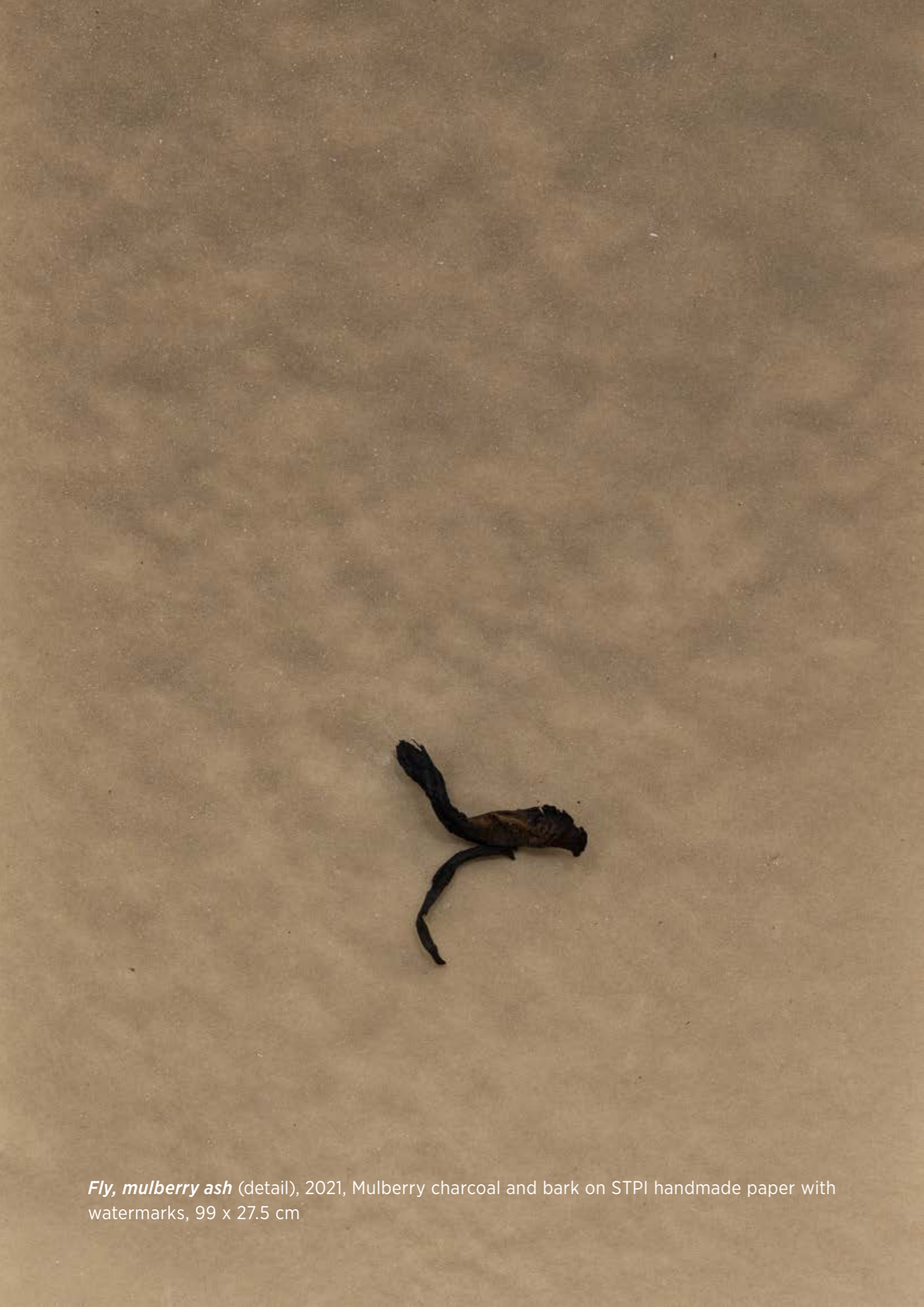
CY21-05

2021

Offset lithography on STPI handmade
mulberry paper with watermarks (diptych)

64 x 43 cm each (artwork)

Variation 3 of 3



Fly, mulberry ash (detail), 2021, Mulberry charcoal and bark on STPI handmade paper with watermarks, 99 x 27.5 cm



Fly, mulberry ash

CY21-09

2021

Mulberry charcoal and bark on STPI
handmade paper with watermarks

99 x 27.5 cm (artwork)

Unique



Lifting a page

CY21-10

2021

STPI handmade mulberry paper
with watermarks

117 x 30 cm (artwork)

Unique



Lifting a page (detail), 2021, STPI handmade mulberry paper with watermarks, 117 x 30 cm

With her STPI works, Chen has rearticulated her familiar motifs in transformed ways. It may be that the unbridled energy of the residency, where the artist and the team were tossing ideas and tests back and forth, had led to her instinctively making decisions that drew from her previous practice even as the journey was leading her somewhere else.

The appearance of the chrysanthemum and peony, for example, has been a constant since the artist's days of making observational charcoal drawings among other flower species. With the chrysanthemum, depending on where you are at in the world throughout history, these can be a symbol of longevity, joy and vitality, among other auspicious meanings. They are also heavily associated with death and mourning, and are thus commonly used as bereavement flowers. Having grown up in Singapore, the artist has undoubtedly been touched by the flower's strong association with death and departures, given the ubiquitousness of its use as a condolence flower across the city's many florist shops.

As for the peony, Chen was inspired by a Chinese legend, where the first Empress of China, Wu Zetian, had ordered for all flowers to bloom amid winter. Deathly afraid of the Empress' ruthlessness, all flowers in her garden went against their nature to bloom—all except for one, the peony. Enraged, Wu banished the species to Luoyang, a place of harsh weather to keep the peonies from ever flowering. Against all odds, however, they started to flourish. Death and defiance, as encapsulated by Chen's chosen motifs, reflect two sides of the same coin in the artist's thinking through of "departures".





A gentle caress (left-detail), 2021, Charcoal on paper, 36 x 20.5 cm



A gentle caress

CY21-12

2021

Charcoal on paper;

Aquatint and burnishing on paper

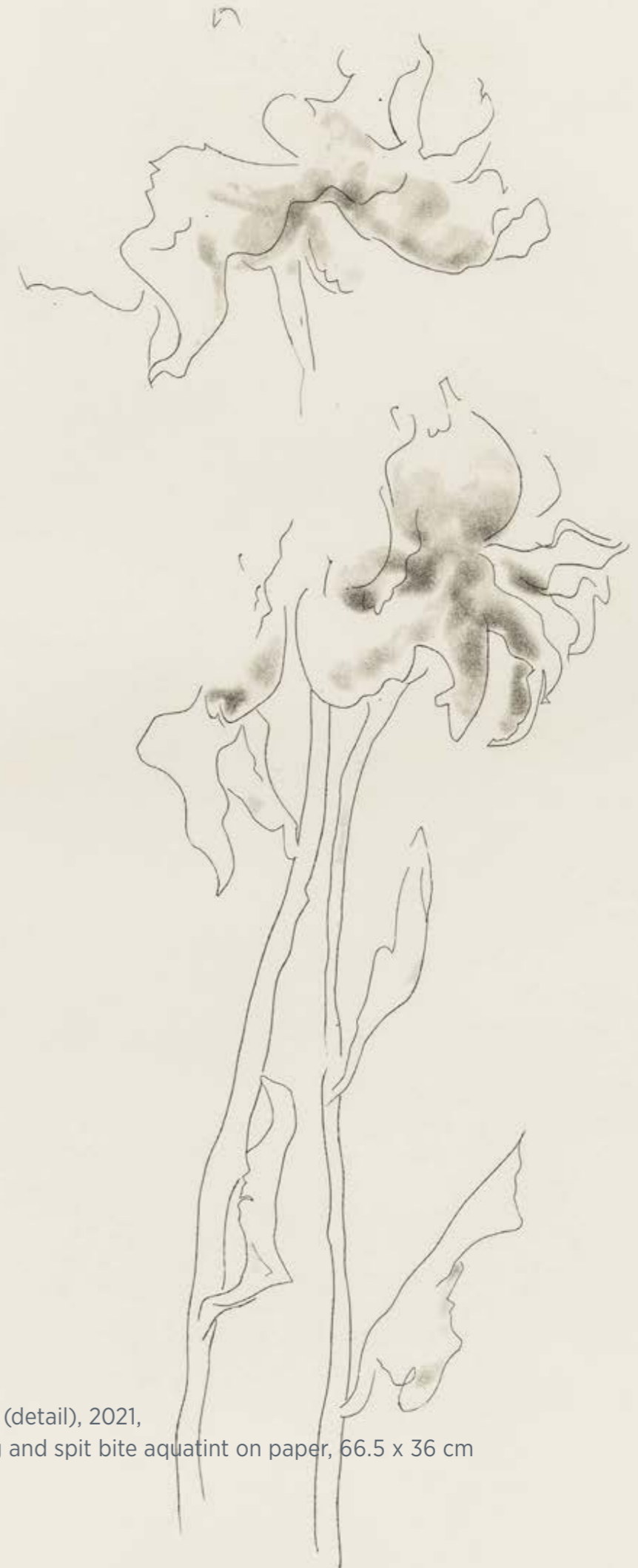
36 x 20.5 cm; 10.4 x 14.7 cm (diptych)

49 x 4 x 57 cm (framed)

Unique



Echoes of shadows
CY21-13
2021
Hardground etching and
spit bite aquatint on paper
66.5 x 36 cm (artwork)
Edition of 6, 2 AP



Echoes of shadows (detail), 2021,
Hardground etching and spit bite aquatint on paper, 66.5 x 36 cm





About STPI

STPI Gallery fosters the exchange of ideas in contemporary art with its diverse exhibitions and public programme. The gallery hosts specially curated exhibitions of works produced in the STPI Creative Workshop and regularly participates in international art fairs. This enables it to nurture and sustain local and international interest in both its residency artists as well as the mediums of print and paper.

STPI is a creative workshop and contemporary art gallery based in Singapore. Established in 2002, STPI is committed to promoting artistic experimentation in the mediums of print and paper, making it one of the most cutting-edge destinations for contemporary art in Asia. STPI sits alongside National Gallery Singapore and the Singapore Art Museum as part of the national Visual Arts Cluster of leading institutions in the region.