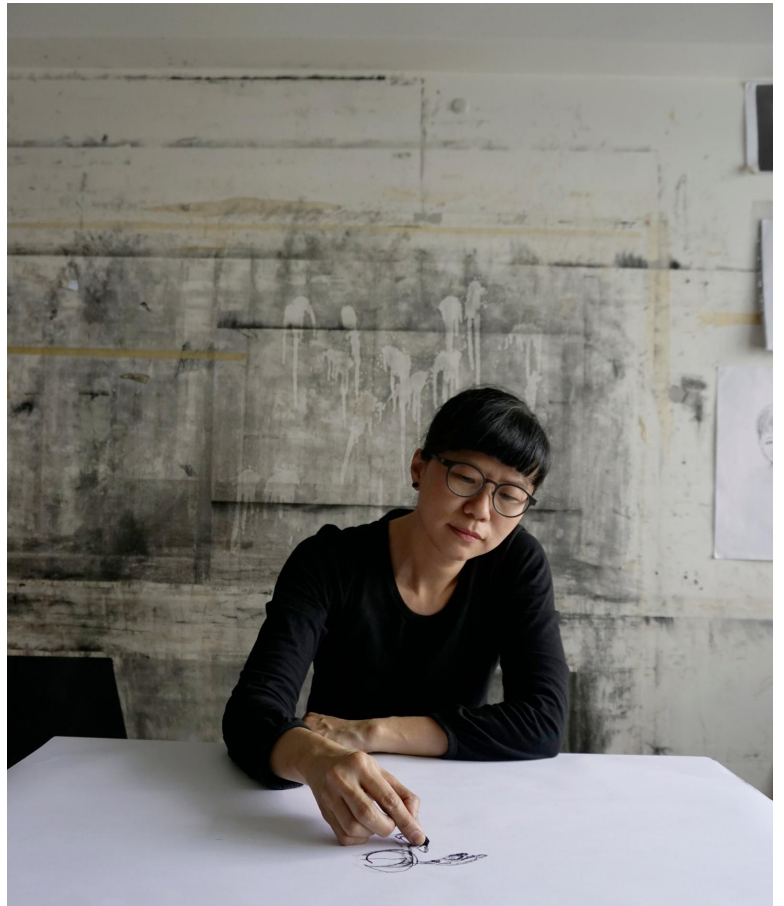


# Artful Parenting

## July's Edition

### Charcoal Drawing: Cultivating your child's creative self- expression



**TANG Ling Nah** is a Singapore-based artist and independent curator. Her work is inspired by the city's transitional spaces. She reflects on urban conditions, especially the speed of life and the lack of interpersonal intimacy in urban life. She creates charcoal drawings, book art, installations, performances and videos to explore buildings, places and architectural spaces as communicators of stories about life.

In 2008, she represented Singapore in the 2nd Singapore Biennale and also exhibited at the 11th International Architecture Biennale in Venice (Singapore Pavilion). She is the recipient of Singapore National Arts Council's Young Artist Award (Art) 2004.

Why did you choose to use charcoal to create your artworks?

When I was pursuing my BA at LASALLE, I took up a drawing module and I challenged myself to use the most basic of all drawing tools: charcoal.

Drawing charcoal is actually just burnt wood which has not undergone complete combustion. It is organic and I like that it is derived from a natural material. I find it fascinating that it can be used for drawing different subject matter—portrait, landscape or still life—and the final outcome can be so varied, even though it is just a piece of wood.

Charcoal is very versatile and easy to work with when making marks. The tactility (the touch), physicality and responsiveness involved when using the charcoal attract me. My bare hands are in constant contact with it. I like the textures and the accidental marks that it can produce.

It can also create a great variation of tonal values. I love the grey tones and the challenge of creating the darkest black, and playing with light and shadows in my drawing, thus helping me to create the ambience I want in my work.

Its impermanent nature also relates to my fascination with transitional spaces (spaces that we pass by but not stay for long) and the fact that the city and even life is always in a state of transition.

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Your artworks are inspired by the city's transitional spaces, such as the void decks in Singapore public housing, alleys, shopping malls. How do these spaces inspire you?

I always find these spaces mysterious, especially the nooks and crannies. It is as if things have happened or are going to happen. Maybe someone had played badminton with a friend at a void deck, or a grandma was waiting for her grandchild returning from school; or a kitten could have been lost in an alley. There seem to be many stories to tell, and I want to capture that kind of mood or atmosphere at that moment of time in that space.

I am also inspired by the architectural elements and fixtures of these spaces, e.g. the pillars, staircases, escalators, doors and windows. They seem to lead us to somewhere, providing some kind of escape.

## What are the benefits of introducing charcoal as an art medium to children?

The drawing charcoal is easy to hold and work with. Children can draw lines, shapes and produce textures and different tonal values (at least 5 tones) easily. With charcoal drawing, a child can focus on these basic elements of art first before the introduction of colour theory.

As it is easy to manipulate, a child has all the freedom to create all kinds of marks with charcoal. One can use the hands to smudge and the charcoaled hands can be used to “print” marks as well. So, it is very tactile, and encourages the child to use his/her hands, developing the sense of touch.

As the charcoal sticks come in different sizes, they can be broken to a length that the child can hold. It can, in a way, let the child relax and draw without restriction—we can tell the child: “It is OK to break the charcoal and get messy on paper.”

In terms of the support or surface to draw on, one just needs paper. For practice, it doesn’t have to be the professional textured paper for charcoal drawing; the usual cartridge paper in art block pad, or even mahjong paper would do. One can even draw on wall and wood (provided that they parents permit LOL).

In addition, using the kneadable eraser is also fun. It can be pinched into different shapes and sizes to erase unwanted marks and create negative white spaces. This can be a “de-stresser” as the kneadable eraser is like play dough that can be moulded and used to remove charcoal.

## How can parents help to cultivate their child’s creative self-expression through charcoal drawing?

They can encourage the child to create all sorts of marks using charcoal. For instance, the child can draw with a theme in mind (e.g. my favourite garden), but the child should be given the freedom to develop his/her own imagination and create the drawing on his/her own.

At the end of the drawing, ask the child to share about the garden. Let the child explain his/her “design rationale”. Even without a theme, the child can draw in an abstract manner responding to his/her own feelings at that moment. If the child runs out of idea, give prompts here and there by suggesting certain shapes or even just provide an adjective such as “wobbly”, “jumpy”, “quirky”, etc.



*Kneadable erasers are pliable erasers that can be used in graphite, charcoal and chalk drawings! They do not leave any residue like normal erasers and are much better when you need to erase a very small detail.*

### 3 tips on introducing charcoal drawing to children at home?

#### *Tip 1: Drawing without too many restrictions*

Provide your child with a large drawing surface. You can use mahjong paper or any big piece of paper so that your child has the freedom to draw any subject at any size. If it suits the space you are using for your child to draw, tape the paper on the wall and lay newspapers on the floor (to protect the floor for ease of cleaning). If taping paper on the wall is not possible, laying the paper on the floor is also fine as the child can move around, outside the paper to draw. Any restrictions should pose more like a challenge for your child to problem-solve, rather than something that is a total “no-no”.

#### *Tip 2: Cleanliness and safety*

To avoid charcoal marks on clothing, wear an apron or just dark-coloured clothing like black old t-shirts, but essentially, do not reprimand your child for getting “dirty”. Encourage your child to get “charcoaled” hands. It is always fun to hold the charcoal in one’s hands and make marks with it and smudging with hands. Once you and your child are done drawing, remove most of the charcoal with wet tissues from the hands first. It will make it easier to clean with soap and water later. Just remember! Do **not** put charcoal and “charcoaled” fingers into your mouth! If you will be using a fixative on the drawing, you should wear a mask and do the fixing outside the house in an open air environment.

#### *Tip 3: Break it*

Don’t be afraid to break the charcoal sticks! Break them into the sizes and lengths to suit your child’s drawing needs. It is also fine to make mistakes. In fact, not using the kneadable eraser to remove “mistakes” is also fine. You and your child can always draw over the “mistakes”.



*Charcoal drawings will usually be finished by spraying a fixative to prevent accidental smudging that can change the look of the drawing.*