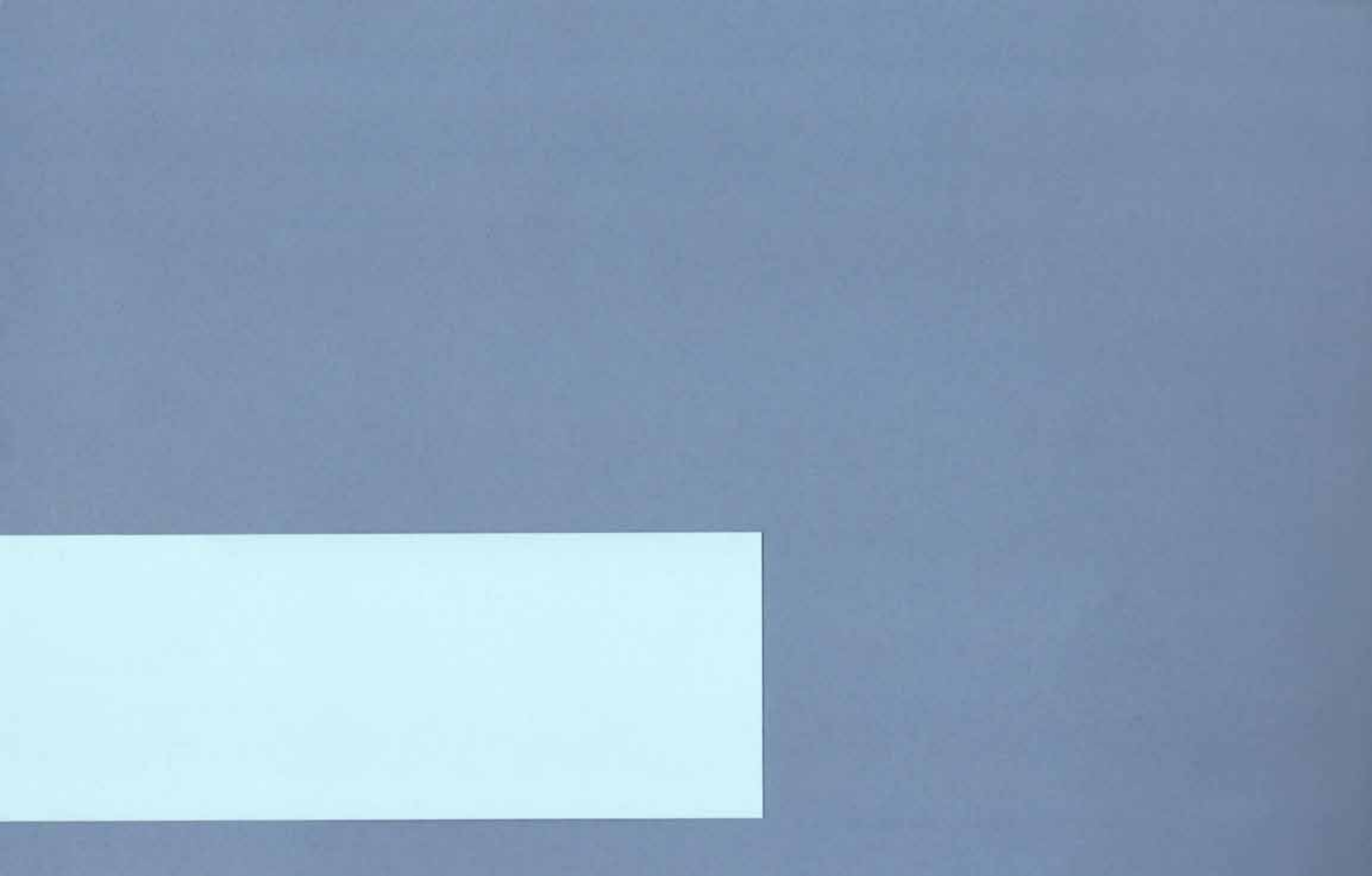




The
Blue
of
Distance

Wyn-Lyn Tan



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WLTN

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05 Sep - 25 Oct 2015

FOST Gallery

SIGNS OF THE SUBLIME: WYN-LYN TAN

by *Dr. Charles Merewether*

"I am becoming more lucid before nature..." Paul Cézanne (1839–1906)

Reflecting on her way of thinking and work processes, the artist Wyn-Lyn Tan recently wrote:

"My work in this exhibition pays homage to these landscapes I've visited, as I give breadth to vistas of memories, light, colour and atmosphere. But moving beyond the 'landscape,' the act of mark-making is as much a subject. As in abstraction, there is the process of 'finding' the painting, and knowing when it has reached its most poignant – allowing for all the contradictions between something that looks like it could be determined, but which also appears to be the result of chance and spontaneous mark-making."¹

Wyn-Lyn's engagement with mark-making has become a key subject in expressing her growing interest in the materiality of her practice. The results are most evident in her latest works, radically utilising the space of FOST Gallery in Singapore for the artist's *The Blue of Distance* exhibition in September 2015.

¹ Wyn-Lyn Tan, *The Blue of Distance*, Artist Statement, 2015.



Fig. 2
The Weight of Water series
Briefest Stain of Dusk
2010
Acrylic on canvas
122 × 102 cm

We may recall Edmund Burke's tremendously influential *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, published in 1757.⁶ Burke's description remains the defining terms, even today in the Oxford English Dictionary. The sublime affects the mind with a sense of nature's irresistible power and inspiring awe at its vastness and grandeur.

We may think also of the pictorial equivalent to Burke's definition in the work of Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840). Having travelled through the Pyrenees (Swiss Alps), Friedrich created paintings of terrifying wonder, out of his sketches and recollections. Likewise, Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775–1851) painted throughout his life exquisitely calm seascapes and also scenes of man's struggle to survive his encounter with the wild sea. Both artists helped define the sublime and extend its popularity amongst art-going audiences.

But what of the contemporary era? Did modernism extend or recast the sublime after the end of the Romantic era? To a certain degree there is a continuation between the conception of the sublime in the period of Romanticism and work of Friedrich or Turner and later to that of abstraction and work of Kazimir Malevich (1879–1935), Barnett Newman (1905–70) and Mark Rothko (1903–70). Common to them all were the quasi-religious undertones of their point of view. This is expressed in their work; whether it was in the recognition of the sublimities of nature as represented by Romanticism or prohibition surrounding representation in the work of modernist abstraction.

And Asia, did the sublime touch the heart of contemporary art in Asia? We can, of course, discover a history of the sublime in Asia, especially in China, Japan and Korea. In China, it is intimately connected to the concept of *qi*, a vital force of the body and mind. In its definition, one may turn to the writings of Confucius and to Mencius from the period of the Zhou Dynasty (1046–256 BC). The sublime in the modern era of the Asian world may be defined as expressing a continuation with traditional Chinese art.⁷ In the post-Mao epoch of the 1980s and the opening up to aesthetic experimentation, greater attention was paid to questions of abstraction and materiality. With this development, more emphasis was given to ink as distinct from brush.

6 To this we could add the analytical discussions of the sublime and its relation to the concept of the beautiful by philosophers Immanuel Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel amongst others.

7 The Tang Dynasty (618–907) art historian and critic, Zhang Yanyuan was the first to comprehensively define traditional Chinese painting.

As noted, Wyn-Lyn had already devoted part of her studies and shortly thereafter, spent time in China, further developing her skills in traditional Chinese art and ink painting. The challenge was in finding a way to combine this and her experience of Northern Europe. Thinking through the sublime was a potential way to bring these two influences together.

Early on in her practice, as in her 2009 exhibition, we see a more traditional European rendering of the sublime in her work. A little more than a year later, Wyn-Lyn held her second solo exhibition at FOST Gallery in Singapore from 9 July to 31 August 2010. Entitled *The Weight of Water*, she showed nine new acrylic and mixed-media paintings on canvas as well as an installation (figs. 2, 3). The title of her exhibition drew upon Anita Shreve's *The Weight of Water*, published in 1998, a fictional novel, full of geographical and nautical details about the Isles of Shoals, a group of small islands and tidal ledges some 10 km off the east coast of North America, straddling the border of the states of Maine and New Hampshire.

The artist wrote:

"Water is fluid and plant, yet gravity and its ceaseless flux form mountains and rocks. Craggy forms suggested by outlines, strokes and washes that run into each other, emerge and recede into a moisture-laden atmosphere. My visual inspiration came from the ebb and flow of tides, calm pools, stormy seas, and the aftermath of rain."⁸

The following year, Wyn-Lyn applied for and was awarded another residency, The Arctic Circle, beginning in October 2011. It was an artist- and scientist-led annual expedition, whose stated mission was to support the "creation and exhibition of new and pioneering work, and aims to empower the creative individual, while fostering the collaborative." This attracted international artists of various disciplines, scientists, architects and educators. During her residency, Wyn-Lyn travelled to the international territory of Svalbard, an archipelago in the Arctic Circle, located about midway between Norway and the North Pole that, predominantly, is composed of glacial ice and rock and best known for its mining industry.



Fig. 3
The Weight of Water series
Inked Drop
2010
Chinese ink and acrylic
on rice paper, wood
Dimensions variable

8 Wyn-Lyn Tan, *The Weight of Water*, Artist Statement, 2010.



Fig. 5
I See You in the Light of the Water
 2014
 Acrylic on canvas, mirrored steel
 Dimensions variable

ten the book not long after her return from Iceland where she herself was on a writer's residency in The Library of Water.¹³ Wyn-Lyn quotes a beautiful passage from Solnit's book:

"The world is blue at its edges and in its depths. This blue is the light that got lost. Light at the blue end of the spectrum does not travel the whole distance from the sun to us. It disperses among the molecules of the air, it scatters in water. Water is colorless, shallow water appears to be the color of whatever lies underneath it, but deep water is full of this scattered light, the purer the water the deeper the blue. The sky is blue for the same reason, but the blue at the horizon, the blue of land that seems to be dissolving into the sky, is a deeper, dreamier, melancholy blue, the blue at the farthest reaches of the places where you see for miles, the blue of distance. This light that does not touch us, does not travel the whole distance, the light that gets lost, gives us the beauty of the world, so much of which is in the color blue."

In reference to Solnit and her own process of picture-making, Wyn-Lyn notes:

"I draw upon it as inspiration, not so much as reference. The starting points of my paintings are sometimes inspired by lyrical, descriptive literature which then meanders into ideas. Or becomes abstracted into a mood or atmosphere that inspires. But thereafter, the painting process and dialogue with the canvas and medium take over."¹⁴

In 2014, Wyn-Lyn undertook a one-month residency with the Inside-Out Art Museum in Beijing, resulting in an exhibition *Reflection*, composed of a series of paintings, performance and installations. One of its principal works was a painting installation entitled *I See You in the Light of the Water* (2014), suspended over a steel mirrored 'pond.' The dual paintings - one above and another below and back-to-back - present an alternate landscape in the mirrored reflection (fig. 5).

In addition there were over 100 lotus flowers and water lilies handmade out of Chinese rice paper and bun-steaming cloth. The performance explored the symbolic meaning of the lotus flower in Chinese culture, as visitors were

¹³ A number of artists have had residencies at The Library of Water, including Roni Horn.

¹⁴ Wyn-Lyn Tan, Interview Notes, 2015. Op.cit.

invited to participate in releasing these lotus sculptures into the pool in front of the Museum (fig. 6). It was a cathartic gesture as the lotus flowers floated away before sinking into the water. They were then retrieved and left to dry inside the museum along the window facing the pool. As the wet lotus flowers dried out, they bloomed again, signifying the idea of their transformation and renewal.

There is a critical shift in the work. Again, Wyn-Lyn returns to Chinese aesthetic traditions but not this time through direct ink painting itself. Rather she uses performance and installation, demanding of both herself and audience to be more conscious of the materiality of her practice. Mark-making is made manifest and the sublime returns again.

A year later, Wyn-Lyn returns with her new exhibition, *The Blue of Distance* at FOST Gallery, from 5 September to 25 October 2015. To enter the gallery is to enter a world the artist wants the audience to become immersed in. On the principal wall, there is one work composed of several pieces of layered plywood, mounted on the wall. Over these layers of curvilinear shapes, Wyn-Lyn has painted what seems to be 'Arctic scenes' so that the entire wall surface appears to be a virtually floating Arctic world. Then running along the perimeter of half the gallery, there are several works on canvas of various lengths. All 61cm in height, they appear as a continuous or endless horizon line – akin to a horizontal Chinese scroll. And thirdly, in a small long narrow side room, there are two large paintings facing one another. Each of these paintings are encased in a deep box-like frame with mirrors alongside the inside rim. The reflections open up the illusion of another space beyond. She writes of the process:

"And it is an unconscious act in the making where the painting takes over. Marks get layered over, and new ones take over; the energy of a painting might change over the course of time, evolving into something quite different at the end from when it first started. The energy that comes out of 'wrongness' all adds to the emotional terrain of a painting. And the layering that goes into each painting becomes the narrative of process that takes over. The material process of painting leads me into emotional terrain, which is effected by gesture, mark-making, atmospheric tones. I'm interested into going into an evocative space that has depth and nuances, as well as a sense of vastness (and emptiness). And like traversing over unfamiliar landscapes, it leads to the discovery of atmospheres and emotional terrains."¹⁵



Fig. 6
Reflection
2014
Chinese rice paper, cloth
Dimensions variable

15 *ibid.*



The Colour of Longing I
2015
Acrylic on canvas
61 × 174 cm

The Colour of Longing II
2015
Acrylic on canvas
61 × 174 cm



Between Darkness and Light
2015
Acrylic on canvas
61 × 122 cm



Breathing the Ephemeral
2015
Acrylic on canvas
61 × 126 cm

Lost Light
2015
Acrylic on canvas
61 × 152 cm



Northern Desire
2015
Acrylic on canvas
61 × 96 cm

The Blue of Distance
2015
Acrylic on wood
Dimensions variable







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