

Aesthetica

Vibrant Improvisation



Experimental musician turned abstract artist, Tatawa (Wei Tan) explores the idea of self-revelation through improvisation in fiercely honest and biographical mixed media paintings. She throws raw ingredients onto the canvas and brutally stirs them into a soup, until the nature of habit is revealed as an accidental source of structure.

A: How has being a musician informed your practice now as an abstract artist?

T (WT): Having been through formal education in music, it is a challenge for me to create a piece of music without judging it through the eyes of academia. I crave the freedom and spontaneity of creating like a child. So in a way being a musician has taught me to value “the bliss of ignorance” which I can still access in art. I also see it as an experiment – what can I create as a trained musician and what can I create as a self-taught artist? How are they different? For instance it has been interesting for me to realise the difficulties of having too much freedom in art and to observe how I learn to, ironically, limit this freedom.

A: How do you think that the two senses can combine, translating sounds into visuals?

T (WT): I think that all senses can be combined, and are already combined, and thus the phenomena of synaesthesia. In dance, sound induces movement. In art, this movement simply produces an image. Intuitively, rhythm may inspire painting gestures, harmony may inspire colour palettes, melody may inspire geometrical patterns. The words rhythm, harmony, melody, gesture, colour and pattern can be used in both music and art. This translation can also happen artificially, for example by mapping properties of sound into aspects of an image on a programming software. However like everything else in life I prefer to see them in a big bowl of soup – sounds, visuals, emotions, thoughts all stirred up together – and in a sort of lazy manner, watch their relationship unfold itself without really doing anything.

A: Do you think that your paintings contain a sense of narrative?

T (WT): Yes I believe that my paintings are narrative and biographical in nature. I see my paintings as diaries and the act of painting as “journaling”. As a musician I make field recordings of my surroundings and arrange them into a story-like collage; as an artist I record my daily thoughts and emotions as gestures on a canvas. I often name my paintings after a particular event – for example *Gross Coincidence* was made after bumping into someone I did not wish to see, and *Random Memory Generator* was created after a regression therapy session. However, the specificity of these “journal titles” in no way reflects the ambiguity of the “journaling process” – instead of consciously recording memories I let myself purge them subconsciously, and then look at what comes out – and what comes out is always relevant as it reveals all the influences I have absorbed during the day, the day before, years before, and generations before.

A: How is improvisation important to your work and what does it allow you to create?

T (WT): I learnt improvisation as a musician and it is a great tool for generating new ideas. I see it as automatic writing, or even channeling. Improvisation is just a way of stretching my preconceptions of painting, the way I move the paintbrush, the colours I choose, and the forms I create. There always comes a point during an improvisation where I viscerally feel like I am breaking through a barrier, and that is usually when I make something satisfying. However, this barrier keeps receding and both the thrill and annoyance is in chasing it. I also use the act of improvisation to reveal the limitations of habit – no matter how the hand tries to move differently, it is unable to shake off its conditioning. The more I improvise the more I reveal my limitations and thus myself – and this self-revelation forms the narrative in my paintings.

A: Is the act of creating as important as the outcomes?

T (WT): I think that both are inseparable and the outcome always accurately reflects the act of creating, like how we are an accurate reflection of the food we eat or the thoughts we think. So we cannot make one important while not simultaneously making the other important. It is a funny paradox because in all forms of art the release of attachment to an outcome will always lead you to a more desirable outcome. So in a way if you value an outcome you must make it unimportant first.

A: What relevance does colour have in your paintings?

T (WT): Like all other elements in my paintings, colour is part of the improvisation. Sometimes I pick a colour that I have been obsessed with at that time, sometimes one that I hate, sometimes it ruins the painting, and sometimes it finishes the painting. But in general, I lean towards a multicoloured palette instead of a monotone one, just because it is what you get (at least at first) when you release control of your palette – you pick anything you see and squeeze paint straight out of the tube onto the canvas without mixing. I use laziness as part of my composition – I value the reluctance to think and the lethargy of the mind, and I want to exhibit that in my paintings.

A: Do you think that your works contain a certain emotion that you impart onto them through your own experiences or energetic processes?

T (WT): The last thing I mentioned, reluctance and lethargy, are two emotional states that I impart onto my work. On the other end of the spectrum, I also express a sense of impulsiveness and desperation. As a result there is a constant tug of war – between the lethargic body and the restless mind, or between the reluctant thinker and the desperate feeling-body, for instance. It is about being tired and energetic at the same time. That is why I like to create textures that are in between solid and liquid – something like molten lava, or a piece of wet clay. This in-between state has an uncomfortable tension, being always both unchangeable and on the verge of changing. But it is also a state of perfection, containing all its unexpressed potential and all the energy that is about to explode.

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Credits:

1. Wei Tan, *Gross Coincidence*, mixed media on canvas (2016)
2. Wei Tan, *Abdomen*, mixed media on canvas (2016)
3. Wei Tan, *Ball Game with Dog*, mixed media on paper (2016)

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