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Tan Mu – Dawn: Review by Li Yizhuo

The Widening Gyre: Between a Drop of Water and the Trinity Test

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“Turning and turning in the widening gyre/ The falcon cannot hear the falconer.” W.B. Yeats wrote in 1919, dwelling on the turmoil of the First World War, the Irish War of Independence, the Russian Revolution, and the influenza. Repeating histories of war, pandemic, and crisis readily draw a parallel across the period of a century.”

In Tan Mu’s latest exhibition at Peres Projects, Berlin, there is yet no sight of symbolism, of a slouching, beastly modernism as such. One indeed finds the media spectacle of a disaster in The Gulf of Mexico; Tan Mu painted the nightmarish scene caused by gas leak from an underwater pipeline in July 2021, based on a widely circulated video taken on a helicopter on the same day of the accident. The fire spread rapidly in a vortex and would not die down for hours despite massive effort. One may call it disconcerting, alarming, but in the form of an orange blaze on the ocean surface also revealing of the spiralling environmental impact of human activities. As the investigation into the spill and cause of fire linger on, Yeats’ lines of a world falling apart sound louder.

The group of paintings on view, however, are neither mightily apocalyptic nor hopeful of a forthcoming salvation. They spiral from a theme of global connectedness to an analytic acuity that deals with a vast scope of subject matters. Across the gallery two series of paintings, The Splash of a Drop (2022) and Trinity Testing (2020), of radically different topics, bear striking resemblance in their form, palette, and sequence. A drop of water

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unpacks its splash on one end of the gallery, from the initial contact with a surface to resumed stillness. In exact same sizes, Tan Mu deals with images from the first nuclear test in human history. Within a few seconds, the smooth, bright globe from the plutonium implosion device exploded into a mushroom cloud of debris.



The former took shape in 1895 on the desk of the English physicist Arthur Mason Worthington, and the latter, under the code name “Trinity”—a reference to John Donne’s poem—was conducted in 1945 in New Mexico. Such closeness between the utmost horror and the tender, omnipresent encounter, as well as their parallel temporality, heightens on the one hand, the laws and principles abided by all matters and, on the other, the unstable nature of the most or least familiar objects, flowing in forms of mass and energy.

The works are nonetheless not about picking and pairing historical events or archive images. It is Tan Mu’s approach that arguably renders such visual affinity inevitable, or more precisely, the approach brings out the shared rules and patterns behind the unconventionally related moments. The result is an analytic practice evocative of Bernd and Hilla Becher’s photographic collage of industrial structures in comparison, by fitting objects of immensely different scales and functions into a neat composition. Throughout the exhibition, this gaze of rigour and wonder applies equally to the imaging of an embryo and the logic circuit in a computer system, both edged by ethereal colours and centred on a dark background. The chip’s soft edges and dark spots from wear and erosion take on an organic form similar to anatomic images of the brain.

The two paintings titled *Privacy* then transform a functional ID roller stamp, typically found on confidential documents to ensure privacy, into a tool and output of contemplation, reminiscent of the Zen Buddhist painters whose brushstroke acts as both a vessel and a trace. The gesture of concealment lures a viewer closer, and one notices the intermittent legible letters from the stamp and ambiguous ink dots, even the rare creases and stains, homing in on the processual interplay of the canvas, the roller stamp, and the artist’s hand. A similar antimony is seen in the curtain and translucent hourglass from beneath in *Stage*. Between display and charade, knowledge and disguise, prudence and contrivance, the line is thin, and tempting.

In *3D-Printing House*, a robotic arm vies with the human hand to create buildings layer after layer, with few limitations in structure or material. Whereas at the end of the 19th century Worthington resorted to drawing under technological constraints of photography, Tan Mu’s retracing of the printhead’s movement is a more

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conscious return to the medium of painting, an awareness one may regard as an embodied pondering amid technological advancements.

Solar Farm depicts the satellite view of a solar farm, nested in lush green, as captured from the image gallery on a phone. Immediately the Solés in Alcarràs come to mind. The film, premiering at this year's Berlinale, follows the family's loss of a peach orchard, their main business for generations, to make room for solar panels as the landowner decides, and the ensuing divides and conflicts. The panels on view here—in the climate politics today, a sign of progress and responsibility—when contrasted with the idyllic way of life, inadvertently become a symbol of violent linear progress, of the machinery of technology: the sun as source of power instead of light, and the panel as converter of not only energy but also landscape.



While the world becomes less concerned with the symbolic system of the centre compared to Yeats' time, be it monarchic or spiritual, the dawn of each new age deserves artistic treatment that extends beyond their immediate realm, a task particularly demanding to the medium of painting.

This is where painterly ingenuity is manifested in a meditated formula of subject, dimensions, and technique. From afar, Silicon reflects the dramatic cold light of a lab shot through hard edges and solid surfaces. Close up, the distinct forms apparent to one's eye blend into soft patches of colour and restrained touches of highlight, laced with fleshy pink and sapphire blue. The ephemerality rests on a careful balancing between realistic composition and abstract clots and ridges, while dealing with the sharp focus affront and light temperature in the source image.

Considering the still unfolding implication of the atomic, the internet, the digital and virtual, the post-pandemic in this world, the exhibition is not keen on conclusions or monuments, but a world where each invention and observation affects the other.

Catch Tan Mu's exhibition DAWN at Berlin's Peres Project before it's closing on Friday, 7th October. Find out more on www.peresprojects.com