

Wonderland.

TAN MU

The artist chats her iconic paintings inspired by technology, currently showcased at Berlin's Peres Projects.

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The ocean is ablaze after a rupture in an underwater pipeline in the Gulf of Mexico. Back in her studio in New York, painter Tan Mu immediately gets to work. Screenshotting a phone video posted online, she begins painting. Six hours later, the fire is extinguished and the painting, complete.

Tan Mu is an artist who chronicles technology. She paints from screens through a millennial gaze, sanctifying moments that epitomise our era. Much like a cave painter depicting the first bow and arrow or volcanic eruption, Tan paints our first logic circuit, quantum computer or nuclear explosion. In “Gulf of Mexico”, painted in July last year, a mass of orange and yellow swirl in a frothed ocean. Boats circle the inferno and spray the flames. Smudged brush strokes mirror the blurry aesthetic of a phone video. There is something dream-like in Tan’s depiction that points to the dissociated way that world events are presented.

Today, we consume news and information in moments that blink before our eyes. Tan’s paintings are an antidote. She captures moments from recent history. Online articles, scientific archives, and social media are mined for images. Tan’s work creates space for them to be seen anew. I video chatted with Tan from her studio

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in Florida before her upcoming show, Dawn, at Peres Projects, Berlin. We speak about her obsession with technology and growing up in a fast changing world that left her preoccupied with the question: “What is the difference between now and then?”



Zoom calls can be frustrating, the glitching audio and pixelated faces, but Tan re-injects wonder into these now prosaic activities. “Wonder is so undervalued in today’s world. I am always wondering.” She wells with enthusiasm at our trans-continental video call, “It’s incredible! Our words being exchanged via satellites and cables allowing us to talk in real-time.” For Tan, technology is something deeply social, “these devices and systems allow us to communicate and expand our worlds. I am very interested in how we build networks and information systems. This is what’s changing the most, how we communicate and interact.” As the world reels from the numerous Covid lockdowns Tan’s words have even more weight. The isolation that Covid might have entailed in the absence of technology is almost unimaginable. It was in this climate of heightened technological reliance at the end of the first lockdown in New York that Tan began work on Dawn.

“The idea for Dawn is to document events that showcased new discoveries and inventions. Things that were unique or groundbreaking,” explains Tan. She shows me her piece, “Logic Circuit”. A pale blue cellular-like circle dominates the canvas. Within its membrane walls lies a white maze. There is something esoteric in its appearance. It echoes the geometry of ancient Aztec art or a right-angled crop circle. It is a surprise to discover this image is a circuit, one of the most ubiquitous components of our world. Hidden from view in our phones and laptops and holding an immense power lie the many descendants of this invention, the first logic circuit that took humans to the moon as part of an onboard navigational computer.

Tan’s fascination with technology started young. Born in Yantai in 1991, in the midst of China’s unprecedented technological revolution. Change was everywhere. Her uncle worked for The Chinese Academy of Science and would share stories of the latest inventions. She was in awe, awe that has stayed with her until today. In 2007 she started high school at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. Tan describes the school as being “full with painters”. Its focus on traditional art forms was in stark contrast to the technological progress that was taking place around her at the time. “In China the big thing is change.” She describes the cities of her youth as being unrecognisably transformed. “I go back each year and I’m always amazed. New buildings, technology, the high-speed rail. In the US this isn’t the case. If you look at photographs from New York in the ’80s you can

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recognise it as the same city.”

In 2011 Tan headed to New York to live and study. She went to The School of Art and Design at Alfred University where her fascination with technology only grew. Tan was exposed to vintage machinery as well as an advanced lab. She spent time learning print making and creating mixed media installations. “Printmaking trained me to think in layers, to translate images. I was exposed to so many different devices, interesting monitors and screens.” It was only in 2019 that Tan Mu returned to painting and turned towards documenting modern technology rather than working with it.

My phone buzzes with a photo message from Tan. A more recent painting. “At the time this was the most powerful computer we had,” Tan explains. “Quantum Computer” documents the first commercial computer of its kind, IBM Q System One. A sleek blue tube lowers itself into its tinted glass encasement. It could be something from another time or planet, an object of science fiction painted in a photorealist vein. Tan’s project reveals parts of our advancing world so wondrous that even her representational depictions appear surreal and otherworldly. We as a viewer are tricked into wonder as Tan reminds us that our world is as beautifully mysterious as the imagined world of science fiction.



The centerpiece of Dawn, “Trinity Testing”, renders one of the most influential explosions of our time on seven tiny 28 × 36 cm canvases. Taking place over nine seconds, “Trinity Testing” reproduces the famous photographs taken of the first ever nuclear weapons test in 1945. Tan uses a palette that mimics old film photos. In these seven sequential snapshots, we see a smoke-filled sphere balloon into a translucent dome and contract back into the deep black canvas. “It was such a loud event but of course as paintings, they are silent. I also made them small. The mushroom is the size of a crystal ball.” By doing this, Tan gives these over-circulated images a renewed gravitas. She aims to draw attention away from the violent spectacle toward the event’s social and environmental impacts, “I’m inviting you to look at the event and to consider all of the repercussions it had for our world. There are many ways to view it. We can talk about the cold war and radiation but we can also talk about nuclear energy as the most efficient energy force we have.”

Dawn presents important historical moments that took place since this event. Tan explains how this moment in history is said to mark the beginning of a new stage in human development. “Earth’s history is divided into stages of time marked by changes in the earth’s geology, climate and ecosystems. This moment was the birth

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of a new stage.” The Anthropocene era is marked by the dawn of the nuclear age when humans began to have a significant impact on the planet’s ecosystems. “Trinity Testing” works as the perfect centrepiece to the exhibition as it exemplifies the impact that we as humans have by extending ourselves through technology.

My phone buzzes with another photo message. More elegant ballooning spheres, this time tinged blue and forming a pregnant mass of life. “I’ve always been drawn to this circular, rounded shape. We come from circles.” “Embryo” is based on a micrograph – a photo taken through a microscope – that Tan sourced from a scientific archive. “Look how deeply we can explore our own bodies through technology!” In “Embryo”, a large part of the story is the new perspective that technology offers us. Technology can extend the human eye allowing us to see something so deeply human, the beginnings of life.

This is what Dawn is about: beginnings. Tan chose the title for its optimism. ‘Dawn’ describes an expansive relationship with technology that extends the mind and body and develops in conjunction with social and environmental changes. “These advancements are changing the most fundamental domains of human life—work, love, ageing, disease, learning, how we form communities. I question how this new world is interacting with these things.” Through the ancient medium of painting Tan gives us pause to consider our rapidly changing world, not only to appreciate its wonder but to recognise our part in these new systems.

Dawn runs until October 7th at Peres Projects, Berlin.