



TAN LIJIE

Selected Works, 2013-2022

ENCHANTED REALITIES

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TAN LIJIE - SELECTED WORKS, 2013-2022

Long Gallery, Salamanca Arts Centre,
77 Salamanca Place, Hobart
Saturday 19 August - Friday 1st September, 10-4pm, 2023

SOCIAL, Salamanca Arts Centre,
67 Salamanca Place, Hobart
Saturday 26 August - Sunday 3 September, 10-4pm, 2023

The Barracks Gallery, 11 The Avenue, New Norfolk
Saturday 9 September – Sunday 22 October
(Saturdays and Sundays only) 11-4pm, 2023

National Cheng Kung University, Taiwan
Wednesday 1 May-Saturday 15 June, 2024

Curated by Lynne Howarth-Gladston and Paul Gladston

Supported by the endowed funding of the Judith Neilson Chair in Chinese Contemporary Art, University of New South Wales, Sydney.

A SERIES OF DISJOINTED/RECIPROCATING NOTES ON THE EXHIBITION ENCHANTED REALITIES - TAN LIJIE, SELECTED WORKS 2013-2022

Paul Gladston and Lynne Howarth-Gladston

I

This exhibition showcases videos, photographs and assemblages by the Chinese contemporary artist Tan Lijie representative of imagined coexistences between lived realities, enchanted worlds, reveries and dreamscapes. The multi-dimensionality of Tan’s work gives rise to subtly transporting atmospheres as well as unfolding relays of indeterminate feeling which suspend fixed perceptions of the real as well as orderly constructions of time and space. Spaces combine, interchange and deliquesce. Time slows down, accelerates, compresses, expands, halts and reverses. Noise intersects with silence and sounds on the edge of hearing. Narratives begin only to fade out and commence once again along the same lines and differently elsewhere/at other times. Meanings, intentions and identities are in plain sight but never made entirely explicit. There is a discernible congruence with European Romanticism’s visions of sublime illimitability in addition to the defamiliarizing techniques typical of Western/ized modernist and postmodernist art.

II

Tan’s work is informed by personal concerns about the controlling expectations and devastating environmental impact of present-day materially obsessed societies. It is also marked by the residual traces of traditional Chinese Confucian-literati culture and its aspirations toward a harmonious - mutually sustaining – aestheticized reciprocity between the three cosmological realms of Sky-Heaven (*tian*), the Earth (*di*) and the Human (*ren*).

III

The Literati were the administrators of dynastic-imperial China from the end of the 3rd century BCE until the overthrowing of the state’s last imperial dynasty, the Qing in 1912. In addition to administering the Chinese dynastic-imperial state along Confucian lines,

the Literati were also expected (in principle) to be adept at a range of liberal arts including ink and brush (*shan-shui* – mountains and water) landscape painting, calligraphy, poetry and music-making. Confucian-literati aesthetics conceives of a felt spirit/vital-energy resonance (*qiyun shengdong*) between artists, Nature, artworks and viewers as well as a formal interplay of substance and emptiness (*xu-shi*) considered indicative of a dynamic, ultimately harmonizing cosmological reciprocity between the fundamental states of *yin* - that which is worldly, negative, turned away from the light and feminine - and *yang* - that which is heavenly, positive, turned toward the light and masculine.

IV

The Confucian-Daoist pairing of *yin* and *yang* helps ‘to place us in harmony with the turbulent energies that act upon our lives and the universe [...] reality is not a succession of separate moments, or an infinite number of separate “things”, but a seamless web of eternal change [...] “being” and “non-being” are complementary [...] surrounding silence gives music its form.’

V

Aesthetically resonant artworks produced by the Literati were understood to signal a capacity on the part of their makers to bring the disordered human mind into spontaneous accordance with (the *Dao* – way of) Nature and by extension to build and sustain a harmonious society in the face of changing circumstances. The harmonizing, nature-oriented aesthetics of Confucian-literati poetry, painting and music could also be used as a sign of oblique, ethically driven resistance to overweening/disruptive authority. Such oblique resistance is exemplified by the actions of the so-called Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove who retreated from their administrative positions to debate Daoist ideas and engage with Daoist inspired artistic practices as a sign of displeasure with political conflict in China during the 3rd century.

VI

Among the sites of Confucian-literati aesthetic experience were mountain grottos (*dong tian*), scholar’s gardens and temples in which everyday perceptions of time and space were interrupted and initiates supposedly transported to other dimensions/higher levels of consciousness/being. Historically in China the heavenly and the temporal/Nature and the human were never held as being entirely distinct.

VII

Tan’s work makes numerous literary and visual allusions, some to Confucian-literati painting and poetry and its inheritances as part of modern/contemporary Chinese culture.

VIII

In contrast to (and in combination with) the characteristic disjunctures of modernist, postmodernist and contemporary European/American art, Tan’s work engenders distinctly reciprocal affects that retain a specific, culturally grounded potential for transformational re-imagining and demurral from authority. Tan continues to live and work in her home city of Shenzhen at the border between mainland China and Hong Kong – an interstitial space resonant with the indeterminate significances and aesthetics of the artist’s work.

IX

Enchanted Realities - Tan Lijie, Selected Works 2013-2022 is curated with reference to Johnson Tzong-zung Chang’s conception of the Yellow Box; an intervention with internationally dominant modes of gallery and museum display – i.e., the White Cube and its variants such as the ‘Black’ Box – intended as conducive to the showing of works characterized by the harmonising reciprocity of traditional Chinese Confucian-literati aesthetics. Crucial to which is the elegant gathering (*yaji*) where small groups of literati would come together to playfully appreciate painting, poetry, storytelling, performances and music, often accompanied by the sensorily intoxicating consumption of tea, alcohol and exquisite foods.

X

The curators aim to translate the three sites of this exhibition into intimate environments for the playful appreciation of Tan’s work. Their intervention with the exhibition’s various spaces include:

the use of colour, textured/soft hanging surfaces and variable lighting to disrupt distinct subject–object relationships and oppositional critical distancing – the engendering of intimist atmospheres and playing between emptiness and substance (*xu-shi*); interruption of the Western/ized rationalism of the White Cube;

the use of exhibition furniture that encourages the viewing of artworks at close proximity – vitrines, hanging paper/textiles, placed viewing seats and multiple sequential projections;

the extension of the exhibition to spaces outside the gallery – the inclusion of the external world and Nature;

opening events involving the playing of music, poetry reading and the consumption of sensorily intoxicating food and drink that encourage playful interaction with the gallery displays and between viewers – the Confucian-literati ‘elegant gathering’ (*yaji*) meets the white cube ‘private view’;

the combining of sublime European romanticism and modernist/postmodernist defamiliarization with the obliqueness of classical Chinese Confucian-literati aesthetics – while pushing back on the dominance of one decisively over the others; and

an avoidance of the insistent orientalism of the Yellow Box and its trace associations with the historical exclusivity and patriarchalism of Confucian-literati culture.

¹ Laszlo Legeza (1975), *Tao Magic: The Secret Language of Diagrams & Calligraphy*, London: Thames and Hudson.

² Johnson Tzong-zung Chang (2005), ‘Yellow Box: Thoughts on Art Before the Age of Exhibitions’, in Johnson Tzong-zung Chang, Gao Shiming and Eric Weir eds., *The Yellow Box: Contemporary Calligraphy and Painting*, Taipei: Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Taiwan, 8-26.



TAN LIJIE, SELECTED WORKS 2013-2022

VIDEOS

A Mirror Holder (2014)

“This work was inspired by the Chinese writer, Li Yongping’s novel The End of the River: Trace Back to the Source. Yong, a young boy, and his red-haired aunt, Miss Panglong, embark on an adventure through the Borneo rainforest in an attempt discover the headstream of a river which pushes the power of life to the extremely splendid border.

After reading the book, I undertook my own journey to conduct a performance on an island east of the motherland territory’s boundary. The film I made of the performance records my imagination of life and body. The body is materialized. With the help of a mirror, it also produces another alien life in reflection. The mirror shades or fuzzes individual identity and acts as a video screen. The mirror and the film’s multi-screened ‘Byobu’ images have a direct relationship. The image in the mirror is not only of the external landscape project but also the explicit contents of my heart. I continue to use my own body as a subject in my work.”

– Tan Lijie



A Mirror-Holder (持镜的人) (2014). Three-screen video installation, black and white with sound, 10' 49".



22 (2013)

“22 is a short sound-inspired experimental film. The flaring mood follows the melody of the background music, portraying a sense of self-imagination and confusion. This short film tries to describe the state of my age at the time as well as worries for something remote and absurd. There is a girl and an old woman in the film: the girl, at a young age, is tirelessly seeking for a suffocating state, until she hallucinates. The old woman is like an art project walking out of Käthe Kollwitz’s copperplate etchings; she is melancholy and talks to herself. For whom she waits, we do not know.

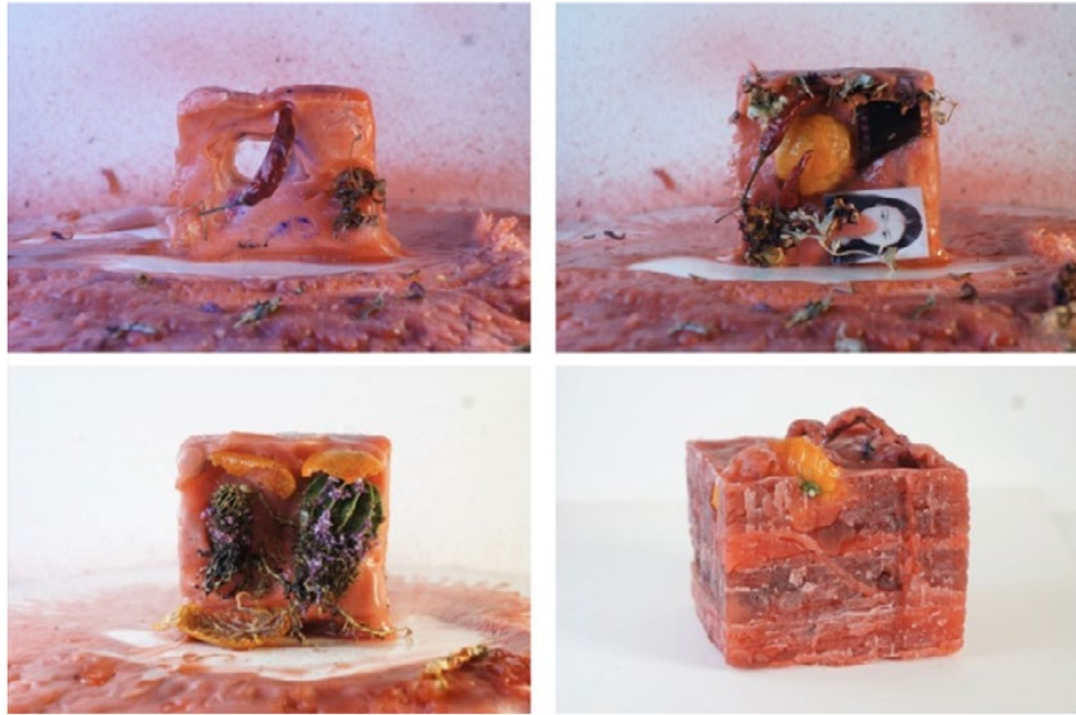
When I listened to this short film’s background music, The Wedding Banquet, for the first time several coquettishly dressed and mysterious young and bulky men burst out in my imagination. They were in still and silent water slowly approaching carrying a red flowery sedan chair. I was enthralled by this dream-like image and decided to try something adventurous and original to bring it to the screen. I am a fervent lover of numerous artworks; the last few black and white shots come from an etching by Käthe Kollwitz. In this etching, there is a mother devastated by the relentlessness of the First World War. She, like a lonely yet warm light, flickers in my heart. I used a special experiment to recreate this scene. As the actress portraying the mother, I obtained a cross-generational enjoyment echoing with the ‘light’ in my heart. When the film was shot, it was also, coincidentally, my birthday. At the age of 22 I experienced a seemingly unsurpassable hurdle and a totally strange and unavoidable pain. This short film was conceived and completed when these feelings became ever more intense. The film is titled ‘22’ in accordance with my age at the time.”

– Tan Lijie





22 (廿二) (2013). Single-channel HD colour video with sound, 3' 46".



***Wax* (2013)**

“Wax can be understood as a container of time. I blended red wax with my portrait and daily necessities from the rented house in which I lived. The film presents flashbacks with the objects gradually appearing in the melting wax.”

– Tan Lijie

Wax (蜡) (2013). Single-channel HD colour video with sound, 1' 39".

PHOTOGRAPHS

The Story of Bougainvillea (2020-2022)

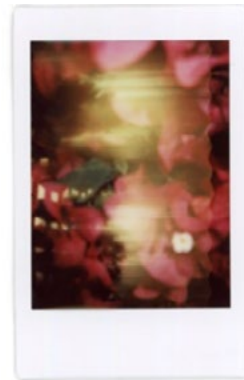
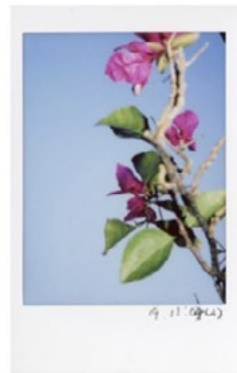
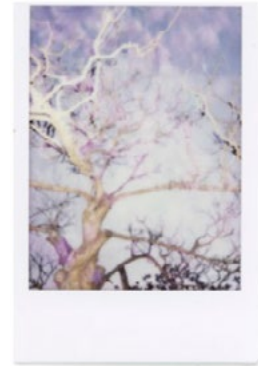
“I accidentally found a family photograph. It was taken at my parents’ first home near Shenzhen Luohu Railway Station soon after my birth, with my mother holding me in her arms on the balcony. In the corner is a bunch of bougainvillea in full bloom with ebullient colour, as if it were the main character of the photograph. Now, after several moves, there are still many bougainvillea on our balcony.

In another photograph from the family album, my mother wears a green uniform as an officer at the border checkpoint with her hands behind her straight back and a slight nod as always.

Bougainvillea has not only accompanied my growth, but also the history of Shenzhen. The short story ‘All Flowers Bloom in Wutong Mountain’ in the book Shenzhen at Latitude 22°27’-22°52’ North by Deng Yiguang, Includes the sentence, ‘Those beautiful flowers and trees finally sank into a mountain of flower pulp, becoming flowery corpses floating in the Liantang River.’ In the story people escaping from mainland China to Hong Kong fled through the blooming Wutong Mountain. The chaotic crowd crushed the flowers all over the ground and those who accidentally fell were almost buried by the thick flower mud. Perhaps influenced by my visual experience, I subconsciously felt that the flower mud contained bougainvillea, which inspired my work Flowers Had Their Own Homes. It blurs plants and human, bringing to the foreground those people with hope in the panic of historical moments.



The Story of Bougainvillea (簕杜鹃的故事) (2020-2022). Series of Polaroid photographs, each 9 x 5.3 cm.



I always feel that the reason why I am so obsessed with the flower Bougainvillea is not only the closeness of it to my living environment, but also a similarity with my temperament. Bougainvillea is warm and bright with thick skin and bold colour; very enthusiastic. This has many similarities with my character, which seems not used to living in the north. It is said that in the place where bougainvillea came from - Brazil, Argentina, and other places in South America - local women use the flower as a headdress to match their bold, unrestrained, and enthusiastic style. Its brightness and strong vitality reflect the innovative city of Shenzhen.”

– Tan Lijie



An Optical Device of Guanfu Saltern (2022)

“In the Southern Song Dynasty, the region of Guangdong surrounding Shenzhen and Hong Kong was divided into thirteen salterns - including the present-day districts of Kowloon, Dapeng and Yantian. Salt was inextricably linked to Shenzhen. Inspired by the ancient salterns, this series of photographs presents an interplay of objects and shadows created in the darkroom. From the small lightboxes which breed pictures, viewers can enjoy the pleasure of the old analogue optical imaging and entering the place where images are born.”

– Tan Lijie

An Optical Device of Guanfu Saltern (官富盐场的光学装置) (2022).

Photographic transparencies and lightboxes, each 36.5 x 24.7 cm.





An Optical Device of Guanfu Saltern.

The Endless Circle (2017-2022)

“In 2015, the border control separating the Shenzhen Economic Special Zone from other regions of China was abolished.

Four years later, I photographed the historic traces of the eight checkpoints and the process of melting with the new policy. In this complex atmosphere, I try to explore the impact of the policy on me and my family, as well as millions of people who live in and care about the city.”

– Tan Lijie













The Endless Circle (漫长的圈) (2017-2022).
Photographic transparencies, lightboxes and digital photographs, variable dimensions.



Garden Memory Series (漆园游影) (2019). Digital photographs, each 60 x 38cm.

Garden Memory Series (2019)

“This series of photographs records two-months of painting alongside the residents of four different places in the Qi Yuan region of the Beifeng Mountain in Fuzhou. In those two months, the climate of the mountains ranged from hot humid summer to dry cold autumn. Teacher Tang worked day and night in the Qi Yuan, and the two gradually awakened each other. A few of us didn’t understand the paint at first, and the allergies we had are unforgettable. We had a joke that only a few of us could understand and even dreamed of getting away, waking up in the process of tearing the bedclothes. The photographs are like stills from a documentary film showing the kindness, labour and thinking that were obtained from the Qi Yuan in these two months.”

– Tan Lijie





“Using a baby diaper to filter lacquer pigments leaves a random pattern on the cloth. As a material that has been used and discarded, it has become an important part of this handmade book.”

– **Tan Lijie**



Garden Memory (Handmade Photo Book) (漆园游影 (手工书)) (2019).

Lacquer, film photography, digital photos, baby diapers, 21 × 24 cm.





Mental Interest Series (2019)

“At the worktable, I found paint had accidentally dripped into the basin. It formed divergent shapes on the water surface, like ever-spreading thoughts in the human mind. So, I dripped more paint into the water. The paint is like a human being, always in the process of change - different seasons, different climates, different dry humidity of the paint, forming a random picture that never repeats on the water surface. Five Lives and Six Children contains the line, “Don’t look at the gods, take the grass as the forest, the insects as the beast, the gravel as the mound, the concave as the beggar, the gods swim in it, and enjoy yourself.” Its texture can be found in the flow of paint - longing for trees, people, gods, water, deer drifting on the paper.”

– Tan Lijie



Mental Interest Series (物外之趣) (2019). Works on paper – lacquer, rice paper and watercolour paper, each 27 x 35 cm.



THE ARTIST

TAN Lijie (b. 1991) was awarded a Master of Fine Arts degree from the Intermedia School of The China Academy of Fine Arts, Hangzhou (2017) and studied as an exchange student at Kingston University, London (2015). A one-person exhibition of Tan's work was held at The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shenzhen (2022). Her work has also been included in group exhibitions at The Salamanca Arts Centre, Hobart Tasmania, The Cipa Gallery, Beijing, the Central Academy of Fine Arts Museum, Beijing and the Djanogly Gallery of The University of Nottingham, United Kingdom. Her video, *The World* was awarded Best Creative (drama) at the Global Chinese University Student Film Awards (2012). Tan's video, *Haussmann in the Tropics* is in the collection of the White Rabbit Gallery, Sydney.

THE CURATORS

Lynne HOWARTH-GLADSTON is an artist, curator, and researcher. She has exhibited her paintings internationally, including in China, the UK, and Australia, and was lead curator of the exhibitions 'New China/New Art: Contemporary Video from Shanghai and Hangzhou,' Djanogly Art Gallery, University of Nottingham, Nottingham, UK (2015) and 'Dis-/Continuing Traditions: Contemporary Video Art from China,' Salamanca Arts Centre, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia (2021). Her Ph.D. thesis is the first to engage critically with the work of the nineteenth-century botanical illustrator, Marianne North. She was a contributor to the BBC4 documentary, *Kew's Forgotten Queen: The Life of Marianne North* (2016).

Paul GLADSTON is the inaugural Judith Neilson Chair Professor of Chinese Contemporary Art at the University of New South Wales, Sydney and a Distinguished Affiliate Fellow of the UK-China Humanities Alliance, Tsinghua University, Beijing. His numerous book-length publications include *Contemporary Chinese Art: A Critical History* (2014), awarded 'best publication' at the Awards of Art China (2015), and *Contemporary Chinese Art, Aesthetic Modernity and Zhang Peili: Towards a Critical Contemporaneity* (2019). He was an advisor to the internationally-acclaimed exhibition 'Art of Change: New Directions from China', Hayward Gallery-South Bank Centre, London (2012).

The exhibition is supported by the endowed funding of the Judith Neilson Chair in Chinese Contemporary Art, University of New South Wales, Sydney.



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