



Parallel Realities

New Paintings by Aishan Yu

Records of the Insubstantial

Adele Tan

This work is intended to setup a dialogue between the mechanical process of time, the turning of the universe and the passionate process of a painting. I'm trying to explore the relationship between the laws of nature and the emotional inner world of human beings. The act of observing the movement of a tree's shadow during a specific amount of time can also be understood as a form of Taoist meditation. Shadows occur between existence and non-existence, presence and absence, visible and invisible, still and moving. This is actually the spirit of Tao, using a unity of opposites as a way of observing and understanding the universe.

- Yu Aishan

The activity of painting has been long been the heroic attempt at accurate representation, not just in mimetic realism but to capture on disparate media the ineffable, the forever dynamic and capricious aspects of time, movement, space, energy and experience. For a young artist, this can be the monumental striving to prove his or her mettle in both the material and transcendental dimensions of art. In the case of Yu Aishan (b. 1981), a graduate of the Sichuan Academy of Fine Art in China and the Slade School of Art in London, certain traces of this ambition can be evinced in her incipient practice. A significant part of it can be attributed to her attraction to Chinese philosophy and aesthetics (where the unrolling of a hand scroll replicates the sensation of a temporal unfolding of events) and even to her interest in cinematography (the moving image) such as the work of Andrei Tarkovsky. Dreams, shadows and interior worlds fascinate her but such themes are notoriously difficult to express to a convincing intellectual and emotional level.

In one set of works, Yu's diminutive but precisely executed oil-on-board paintings feature a solitary female figure in some state of spiritual repose or quiet contemplation. Although by no means an unconventional subject matter, she has desired to imbue them with an emptiness that is simultaneously pregnant with an affective undertow. According to Yu:

My recent paintings focus on a balance of photographic realism and non-representational textures. I explore the field of portraiture through this combination to express modern people's inner thoughts.

Chromatically muted but melancholically seductive, her paint touches wood only to reluctantly register some ghostly presence, like that of the white chemise in *Revati* (2009) which functions somewhat as the hollowed-out shell of an unseen, unidentifiable being. *Revati* incidentally is also the name of a princess in Hindu mythology whose adventures with her King-father to the realm of Lord Brahma the Creator got her caught in a time dilation fix where time runs differently on parallel planes of existence. One minute in Heaven may be one year on Earth. No one really knows whether the woman in the picture is here or elsewhere, despite being locatable by her titular placement at the window or in the bathroom.

Her *Beck Forest* series of paintings are also similarly evocative of this inhibition or introversion. A bald figure in an off-white trench coat set within a forest-scape is turned away from the gaze of the viewer and therefore of indeterminate sex and indiscernible expression. Such is the reticence that the figure could almost blend into the dense foliage and shadows. Does Yu mean for Nature to overcome Man? Or are we at the scene of a very human reverie or fairytale fantasy? These haunting oneiric images, pictures also deceptively fitting for a story book illustration, show the misty and moody influence of Tarkovsky's *The Mirror* (1975), *Nostalghia* (1983) and *Stalker* (1979). Tarkovsky's predilection is for discontinuous and non-chronological structures, where (fictionalised) memories enmesh with factual footage, but in Yu's paintings time appears suspended, held in some precarious balance between the different realms.

But such suspension can only be temporary as Yu is personally invested in qualities of the ephemeral, chasing after the changes of daylight with the inadequate brushes of paint. In *The Tree*, Yu abandons the intricate renderings of realist painting but displaces that labour intensiveness to a large-scale process-based painting project to record the cast shadows of a tree over a day's duration from sunrise to sunset. A large piece of fabric (50 x 25 m) was laid out around a tree in the open countryside and the artist is shown in her process documentation sitting and embedded within her painting as she sketched the tree's shadow as it turned from west to east. No longer is the singular painting sufficient because the observation of the shadow's morphology has to be stretched and made multifarious. As such in the end, *The Tree* had to be a set of eighty slides, a C-type print, a digital 'map' print and a three-minute long Super 8 film.

Shadows, as Yu believes, occupy three-dimensional space but sadly has been distrusted and given short shrift. Therefore, it is noteworthy that the artist does not wholly succumb to representational painting, the traditional home of shadow play with skilled chiaroscuro but instead deals with shadow through non-painterly means. Using shadow sculptures which were cast from everyday objects and then further lit to obtain shapes of cast shadows, these individual shadow-shapes became the shapes of cut-out acetate sheets onto which her MFA dissertation on the topic of shadows was laid out in tonal gradations. The only way the viewer could read her dissertation was through a projection installation where the acetate sheets were flashed via overhead projectors onto surfaces. This is a painstaking and cyclical way to manifest the nature of shadows but every bit more revealing than the obdurate inscrutability that Yu had tried to preserve with her representational figures. If shadows are hard to pin down, our innermost thoughts are perhaps even better at playing fugitives from the shackles of paint and art.



Beck Forest 1



Revati



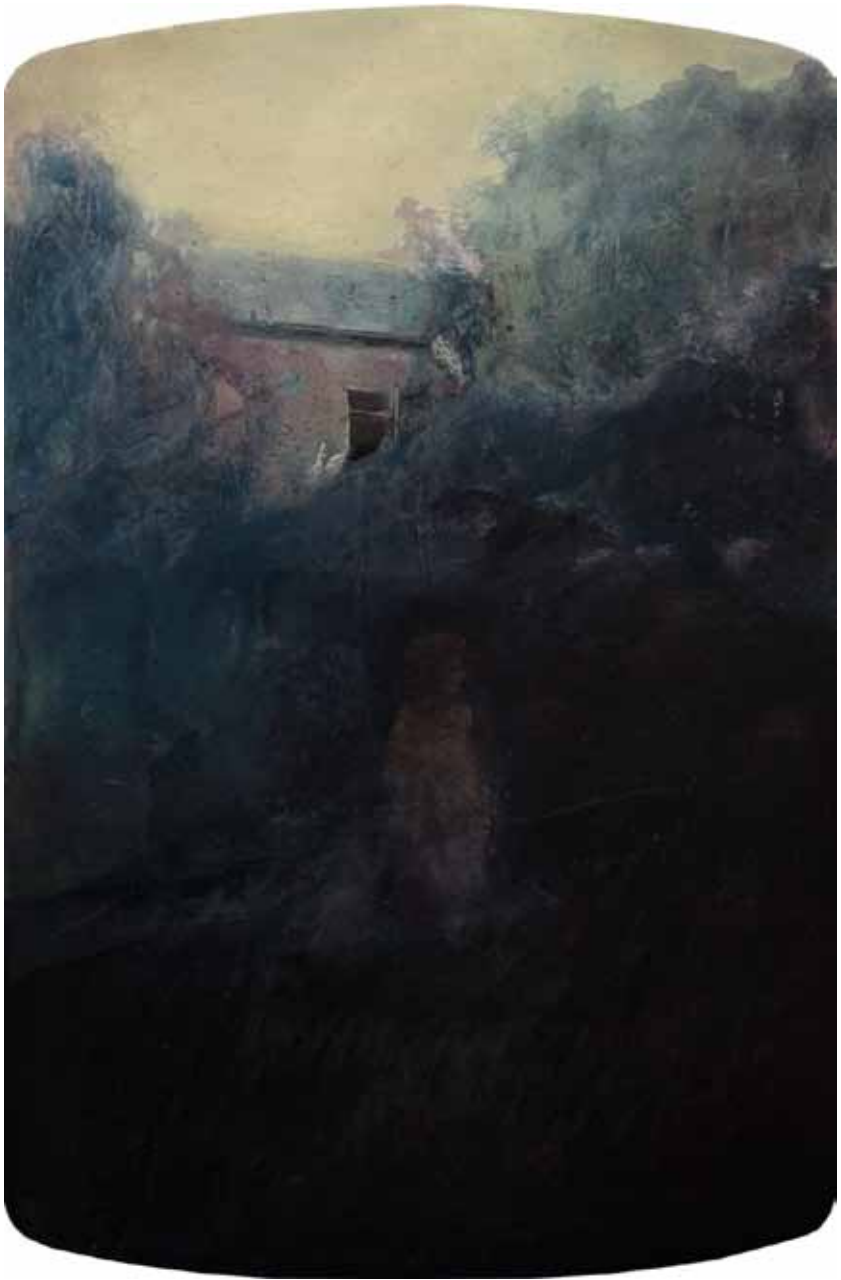
Revati by the Window



Rev



Rev in White



Yard



Bathroom



Balcony



Beck Forest 2

List of Works

Beck Forest 1. Oil on Board, 85 x 60 cm, 2009

Revati. Oil on Board, 27 x 25 cm, 2009

Revati by the Window. Oil on Board, 85 x 85 cm, 2009

Rev. Oil on Board, 85 x 70 cm, 2009

Rev in White. Oil on Board, 35 x 28 cm, 2008

Yard. Oil on Board, 62 x 40 cm, 2009

Bathroom. Oil on Board, 77 x 55 cm, 2009

Balcony. Oil on Board, 37 x 52 cm, 2009

Beck Forest 2. Oil on Board, 73 x 100 cm, 2009

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