

## Stratification and Microscopy: The Neo-materialist Perspectives and Painterliness Anchored in the Art of SHIU Sheng-Hung and Josefina NELIMARKKA in “Glacial”

CHEN Hsi

### Microscopy

If we take into account the fact that both “Glacial” and the previous exhibition “PLABOUR” belong to the “Project Mine”, a curatorial project hosted by Solid Art, we are more likely to notice the neo-materialist perspectives subtly embedded in the exhibition. Going further, since there is a growing discussion in Taiwan’s art scene, particularly in this year, about the role of painterliness and materiality in art, it reminds me of the strong artists’ intentions anchored in the art of SHIU Sheng-Hung and Josefina NELIMARKKA in “Glacial” in response to “painterliness”. With the rhythm put into the overall display of works, this duo exhibition reflects the artistic vision which straddles paintings and readymade installations. In this sense, the “paintings” by Nelimarkka are neither manually made by the artist in order to depict the ideal scenes nor created by applying paints to a solid surface; instead, she utilizes different kinds of printing and shaping technology in contemporary society as her brushes. Also, in the course of her researches in geology and astronomy, Nelimarkka never stops thinking about the nuanced view seen through the eyes of a scientist and those of an artist, thereby transforming her findings into artistic practices.

Walking into the exhibition space, I was greeted by the blue projection light that illuminates the whole area in *Precession(screensaver)* (2021), a spatial video installation. The light dots projected onto the ground are arranged in the shape of the Constellation Lyra, each of which displays a different nano microscopic mineral image. Observed under a microscope, these images of nanoparticles indicate the minerals that can be used as raw materials for pigments. By seeing through the machine’s eyes, Nelimarkka explored the essence of painting materials that goes beyond the physical perception in humans; meanwhile, she brought it into view through this work as the space is filled with microscopic images of the said materials (and the light emitted from the video). Being the first piece at the entrance of “Glacial”, it guides us in viewing and perceiving the rest of artworks in this exhibition — if we perceive art in a way that is not just based on our life experiences, chances are we will approach the infinite creativity that transcends art but links to the complex mechanism of “Gaia” and “Critical Zone”.

In “Glacial”, the perceived ambience of Nelimarkka’s works allows us viewers to experience a flow state. For instance, once we enter the area of *Future Memories (fold far forward)* (2020), a silk installation hung from a rod far above the exhibition wall, we will be fascinated by the drape of silk, on which the printed geological image has been resized to match the scale of the fabric. Or, in *Time-Instants\_Cloudlets* (2021), we will meet an installation series using laser cut clear acrylic to capture the airy, cloud-like feel of its shape as if these sheets are floating around the exhibition space. Unlike the powerful slogans in Barbara Krueger’s art which are characterized by fonts — Helvetica and Futura — and bold colors, the phrases in Nelimarkka’s works treat “cloud” and “wind” as living things so as to metaphorically refer to the way we perceive them and how we are exclusively tied to them under this context.

In this phase, Nelimarkka not always creates actual “handmade paintings”, that is, in comparison to SHIU Sheng-Hung, she employs as many digital techniques as possible in her practices, including printing and laser cutting. As an exception, judging from her handling of the media — sprinkling pigments powders on the prints of microscopic mineral images — *Precession [(re)location]* (2019) uncovers “the hand of the artist” in the most noticeable way. In fact, this sort of creative process is comparatively relatable to the aesthetics in design. Consequently, Nelimarkka’s and Shiu’s works are interrelated in terms of the chosen subjects in art, but together they visualize the dynamics between the design-oriented aesthetics and the painterly expressions through different approaches.

### Stratification

As for SHIU Sheng-Hung’s works in “Glacial”, they feature a fusion of elements inspired by the remnants of his earlier pieces: “landscape pictures” and “Ehagaki” (Japanese pictorial postcards). In addition, online picture is also one of the subjects depicted in the displayed paintings. Among these sources of inspiration, themes pertaining to glacier and the seeds bank developed out of the transformation of mineral field are interrelated to those of Nelimarkka’s art. In terms of the artistic approach and the visual appeal, these works epitomize Shiu’s viewing experiences and echo with Nelimarkka’s object-based pieces, particularly in the sense of materiality and temporality — reflecting an underlying connection between the idea of “glacial” and “precession”.

According to Shiu, the temporality conveyed by pictorial representation, in which painterly brushstrokes and paints are inextricably intertwined, is a recurring theme in his paintings. In this exhibition, Shiu’s approach to the layered images as well as the exploration and traceback for pigment materials is pushed one step further as his concerns over health and environmental issues are progressively emphasized through artistic practices; thus, he has made some adjustments to his practices so as to adapt to the new normal in times of pandemic and paid close attention to the health of himself and his family. With this in mind, Shiu began to trace the source of these art materials with the aim of expanding the possibilities of his paintings.

As a starting point, Shiu used more natural pigments in the exhibited series. In fact, the more he focuses on the listed ingredients of paints, *“the deeper I’m drawn to the beauty of the material itself.”* As far as Shiu is concerned, the making of his previous paintings depends on personal taste and aesthetic preference prior to his handling of materials, hence the final choices and blending of colors. However, now the priority in his practices has gradually shifted; that is to say, *“The first thing I’d do is really feel the beauty of paint pigments, then I’ll think about how to build the composition to achieve painterly expression.”*

Therefore, through the use of pigments with the same hue but with different levels of lightness or colorfulness, Shiu experimented with colors never before seen in his previous paintings, thereby rendering his new series distinctive as shown in “Glacial”. Take the color of green earth as an example: green earth<sup>1</sup> is a shared color name used by many different manufacturers of pigments. In this

---

1. Since the color of “green earth”, which acts as a pun here, also refers to “eco-friendly” and “the planet on which we live”, we can say that Shiu’s choice of color names mirrors his concern over environmental issues.

context, with the scenario of “pigment being named after the same color but made from different ingredients”, the problematization of the notion of painterliness arises — an issue that is occasionally examined by artists in the contemporary art scene but rarely discussed in the academic field; a classical yet contemporary focal point associated with paints ingredients in an artist’s creative process. What makes Shiu different from others is that he focuses on tracing the source of materials, which allows him to expand his painting techniques as to the use of colors and the aesthetic expression after discovering the nuances of ingredients. For example, *The Glacial Landscepa#6-Cobalt* (2021), *The Glacial Landscepa#5-Praseodymium* (2021), and *The Glacial Landscepa#7-Zirconium* (2021) mark the beginning of an artistic intention brought into existence as reflected in the naming of works and the practice of “using mineral pigments to paint minerals”.

Generally speaking, these subtle details of how to manipulate the paint to conform to the artistic demands would be shared among artists only. Yet, in Shiu’s paintings, by using pigments of different textures and hues, he manages to apply the concept of stratification<sup>2</sup> in seed germination to the layering of paints; as never before, the loose brushstrokes and smooth color shifts enable him to create unity in his art — showing an organic spatial feature expressed by the arrangement of colors and images on canvas, as well as a sense of wholeness reflected through the layered brushstrokes that are well incorporated into the depiction of collagelike images. As portrayed in *The Glacial Landscepa#3*, *The Glacial Landscepa#4*, and *The Glacial Landscape-Future*, every picture or landscape scene resembles an image to be edited as they are placed together on one single canvas; in a way, what these images signify or symbolize becomes more like the sum of travel experiences stock photos that are stored in big data systems.

Furthermore, the rectangular boundaries that differentiate elements in the painting seem to imply a nonlinear narrative woven by scattered sensory experiences. However, in *The Glacial Landscepa#2* (2021), the cohesive arrangement of the portrayed images and pictures gives its composition a sense of unity. Besides, within the border of the canvas, Shiu is able to delineate different shapes of pictures and figures in an unrestrained manner. As a result, the visual quality of wholeness of this painting is achieved by its organic internal structure and its pictorial realization.

*“I hope the viewers are able to find these pictorial images accessible and engaging when they read my paintings; meanwhile, led by the painterly brushstrokes and colors, they can also capture the fluid gesture of images.” — SHIU Sheng-Hung*

Nowadays, the world of contemporary art is full of artists who use distinctive visual languages that are in line with the evolutionary process of technology and academic subjects to create various possibilities of paintings. The timeless exploration towards painterly qualities is one of the reasons why painting never dies despite the death of the significance of historical narrative. Driven by the

---

2. The term “stratification” in seed germination refers the process of forming layers of soil according to different degrees of their permeability and water holding capacity. Under the right environmental conditions, this pretreatment allows for the simulation of the natural conditions that seeds require, thereby breaking the seed dormancy and initiating the germination process. In fact, the regeneration of “Taiwan Yew” — one of the endangered plant species occasionally portrayed in Shiu’s paintings — is achieved by cottage propagation and stratification.

pursuit of “painterliness”, artists aim to convey messages in response to reality, either directly or indirectly, through artworks no matter what kind of art styles their works present, such as the constructivism art characterized by the use of simple geometric forms and straight lines; following modernism, the artistic features recognized as flatness and being handmade under the influence of cultural industry; or other forms of expression that draw inspiration from alternative cultural aesthetics. To sum up, in “Glacial”, Shiu’s and Nelimarkka’s works jointly offer a unique perspective on painterliness and materiality. Straddling the line between the “stratification” that helps achieve vigorous vegetation and the “microscopy” that goes beyond human sensory perception, this exhibition reflects their approaches to artistic expressions and materials in response to the “painterliness” under a neo-materialist perspective.