

Artist Conversation on 'Glacial' between SHIU Sheng-Hung and Josefina Nelimarkka

Interview and edited by Hung-Fei Wu

On Color and Pigment

Hung-Fei Wu :

How do you develop your color palette? Any inspiration from, for example, nature, culture or any personal experience?

SHIU Sheng-Hung :

My development of palette kind of followed my intuition, which is more personal preference. Until I was on the process of making 'The Glacial Landscape' series I realised the acrylic materials I used to paint with is somehow too 'plastic' for depicting these scenes, like something missing in that material. I was then prompted to search for new materials and to really research on the natural pigments, which is also healthier for human body.

It didn't take too long for me to get deeply fascinated with these pigments for their forms and shape in the mineral substance. I then started to dig more of their history, like how it evolved in the history of painting. For example, some pigments were found to be toxic for humans and were replaced by something else, or something like Lapis Lazuli that is super expensive, and was replaced by something that has the same effect but cost less.... All this discovery kind of serve as a base for making these glacial landscapes, in which the palette was fused according to my understanding and imagination on each pigment, to hopefully unfold the magic and charm of each one.

Josefina Nelimarkka :

It is nice that we share this mutual fascination with pigments. I have a painting background and I have been working with pigments for more than 10 years. For example in my wet paintings series, the color flow emerging from the changing atmospheric conditions and the unexpected nature of pigments was fundamentally part of the continuous process.

Even though my practice has slightly shifted and become more interdisciplinary, working with pigments is always something I keep returning to. I am interested in the chemistry of color but I have been looking into the evolution of color and its cultural-socio-economic histories. This fascination also led me to go to the laboratory and explore the material structure of the pigments – to understand what is the natural landscape of these colors. The materiality of color is very important part of Precession. The work exposes the hidden views into color revealing what color is actually made of.

A continuous color process can be material or digital. My interest in color arises from its interactive quality, but of course there is this very personal and intuitive level to color which is very hard to explain. I believe there is a lot we do not know about color and perception. color is more than just a perception, it goes beyond observation.

SHIU Sheng-Hung :

Pigments are the raw and primitive material, its something with unpredicted future. Understanding its inner structure gives one more imagination, also enables more possibilities.

Josefina Nelimarkka :

Exactly. In my work, it is not about applying color on a surface but rather it is the process that decides the color and it becomes part of the materiality of the work. Wet paintings may sound a bit mystical but they are very metaphysical – enquiring into the notion of time through a process that is adventitious and uncertain in its being and becoming.

SHIU Sheng-Hung :

I am curious about the blue and purple palette that I often found in Josefina' s works, which resonate with the photographic scenes that often shot in Nordic countries. Are these color often seen in the Nordic sky? Like during sunset?

Josefina Nelimarkka :

When I think about sunsets, I like to imagine the little invisible aerosol particles in the atmosphere reflecting the color to us. So what we witness is not necessarily characteristically 'Nordic' because these particles can travel from anywhere. For example, when you see a deep red sunset, it may actually be the dust particulates from Sahara or another consequential event elsewhere. It is captivating to think about a sunset from this perspective: is it a local phenomenon or does it actually contain a message from another place?

SHIU Sheng-Hung :

I can elaborate with something rooted In my previous 'Forest' painting series. You need a certain degree of imagination when standing on the ground level to picture a more comprehensive sense of color, I was looking for inspiration to expand the spectrum. When you are in high mountain it is totally different story, I especially enjoy the physical feeling when in mountain that is at 2000-3000 meters high, where the air is much cooler.

In Taiwan' s high mountain you also get a different color and landscape from on ground level, especially the climate there usually get even dramatic after noon, like getting foggy and rainy. My painting was therefore inspired by the sense of time, air and humidity. Mountain climbing also challenges the physical

endurance, some people like me might be vulnerable to Acute Mountain Sickness (AMS) which adds a sense of danger. Therefore, mountain climbing not only enrich visual and tactile imagination, but also facilitate another layer of bodily experience. This also change your attitude toward nature and how you value the uncertainty, the mountain will be always there, we don' t need to force ourselves to 'conquer' the mountain top everytime.

On Landscape

WU Hung-Fei :

How do you (re)define "contemporary landscape" through your art?

Josefina Nelimarkka :

Landscape is a temporal experience. In my practice, landscape reveals the interdependency – it is about the different processes and interactions that are present within this passing moment. Landscape is not about a frontal view because it also includes what is surrounding and all those activities may not be so visible, but they are still part of the experience.

In terms of this exhibition, there are various kinds of landscapes. In Precession, it is the internal view into color and a geological time landscape, 'a timescape' that continues in Future Memories. Furthermore, landscape is a bodily experience through language, environment and the present moment. Time-Instants and Cloudlets question how we perceive landscape. A phenomenological approach I already started working with Atmospheric Un/knowing, the outdoor installation in the boreal forest.

These responsive text works physically and philosophically ponder on the relationship between the atmosphere, the environment and our body yet this symbiosis is what makes the work. Our visual senses are so overtaking but the writings attempts to bring forth the invisible in-between. Rather it is accessing the landscape through the moment of 'now' .

SHIU Sheng-Hung :

Though the landscapes in Josefina' s works seem abstract, for me they are extracted from the artistic feeling towards time. Such a feeling is then perceived by the viewers so they will picture their own landscapes, it' s like a switch to trigger more, so the landscapes are not necessarily referring to any specific views.

Josefina Nelimarkka :

It's a nice way to talk about this 'switch' that can change your perspective. It does not necessarily need much, all about experientiality.

I appreciate that Shiu has ability to show this complexity through the language of painting. There is a risk in the ready-made images about the ecological crisis and climate emergency we are used to seeing, that we forget how complex these issues are. In order to really understand the severity and to get us to make a change, we need to understand this complicated interdependence.

SHIU Sheng-Hung :

Actually, my motivation for making the 'Glacial Landscape' was to treat landscape painting as a metaphor. I have lived and migrated from places to places, in which I experience changes through economic development and exploitation, this creates conflicts to the memory and preservation. I started from these very personal observations, and later realised that I could communicate the complexity through landscape paintings.

I was trained in both oriental and west art history. In Chinese landscape painting there is actually a critical part, when a painter shares his observation towards contemporary society or his inner state while depicting a scene. So there are many layers of complexity in it. Though I did not make the glacial landscapes to talk about the climate or ecological issues, I do know better that how as a human being we should live in harmony with nature after I learned so much more about the geology and the migration of mountain plants, and also how it is relevant with my abstract aesthetics and topics like disappear, ephemerality and changes that has been embedded in my practices. In Josefina's work I can see the same abstract elements.

Josefina Nelimarkka :

I am inspired to think through the notion of a moment. Firstly, it is always a possibility, because the moment is already disappearing. The moment always has this actualized but also the potential side. So immediately we are arriving in the realm of philosophy, what is really time and space?

But I also think about the moment in the atmospheric way, through a moment in continuous formation and circulation in the air. Is this moment a consequence of the climatic conditions or is it the energy? So the moment always has this multiple nature. Which makes it a critical moment too.

This present change, whether it is the personal experience that is translated in the painting Shiu talks about or the endless process for example in Precession that defies static being, connects the work to presence although there is always uncertainty about reality how things evolve and interact - or become interpreted.

On Reality

WU Hung-Fei :

Since both you have stepped into the fields of geology that lead to such provocative dialogues generated in this exhibition, I am thinking something quite radical, if thinking like an artist can help save the planet, which I rewrote from the subtitle of the book 'Timefulness', how thinking like a geologist can help save the world). But first, how do you keep holding space for art and poetry alongside science and social science?

Josefina Nelimarkka :

In Future Memories, it is not only the data that is telling us about the change of temperature or the atmospheric conditions of the past but through this data, we are immediately taken to Antarctica to think about the lost ice and how even this data is disappearing on this very moment. Our world is currently in such a fragile position that we need this data for the future to understand what we are doing to the environment.

Future Memories begins from questioning what is the data used in climate modelling yet again the experientiality is important. When we look at the silk installation we look at the complexity that has arrived to the Isle of Arran in Scotland. It is a place where you can literally walk through the time and the landscape reflects the varied geology. The work invites us to consider how is this image possible – what kind of geological time it contains – to think about all the motion around Earth that actually creates this image.

The timescape is almost incomprehensible when we think of geology and these very long datasets that span over millions of years filled with environmental wisdom. However, when we think of the past, we always project to the future. Future Memories is activated by this scientific data used in climate modelling. This data is everywhere, our presence is already influenced by this knowledge, by 'memories of the future' .

SHIU Sheng-Hung :

This is something that I wish my works could do, to invite the audiences to read deeper. Even if the audiences cannot get there or they are not motivated enough to do so, the consciousness is already aroused during the experience, which is also nice.

The data and microscopic images in Josefina's work looks aesthetic to me, and they are capable of triggering imagination towards the past and future. Through the visualisation of these materials, the artist therefore disclose the ignored reality and changes that are deeply connected to human activities.

Josefina Nelimarkka :

The context of the data is important. The art work, the artist and the viewer are influenced by the data. But what is the data? The data is the place it is measured from. Data is beyond numbers, it is what Earth tells us about the living conditions, it is actual, it is reality. I hope this can potentially create a stronger relationship with the work but also open up space for imagination – to speculate with the future?

A shift in reality but we are also invited to think about the source. Where are the climate scientists working? Are the instruments located high up in the mountains where permafrost is melting and glaciers disappearing – or are we talking about the research in the arctic regions and the trapped air bubbles in the ice cores telling about the ancient atmosphere?

SHIU Sheng-Hung :

I spend a lot of time digging into the geologic material of pigments, the pigments for artistic use are kind of left over after the majority of the resources were exploited for industries of high technology or of high economic value. For example, Manganese blue was no longer available in the art supply chain because Manganese is in such high demand for industrial use.

These discoveries lead me to do further research on how minerals are used in contemporary fields and how their values are defined. I also learned from an article (2010-2014) that Finland is the biggest source of Cobalt in the EU, followed by Russia.

Josefina Nelimarkka :

Yes it is true that we have a lot of cobalt in Finland, up in the north, in Lapland, in the unique and wild landscape that needs more and more conservation.

Talking about minerals related to color like cobalt in relation to new technologies, we should remember to care for these resources. When thinking from a mineral perspective, you realise that all technology is 'ancient' because these resources are coming from the strata, from the motion that has been here 'forever'. There is a paradox in technology, it has an idea of newness but actually it is something old.

SHIU Sheng-Hung :

What fascinates me the most when I conduct mining related research is to discover Svalbard. It' s located in a small town that' s developed for coal and iron mining, and is now transformed for global seed preservation. For example, in the future we might need this seed vault to look for medical plants for certain diseases. Svalbard is a place where there is no 'manmade' time, it doesn' t belong to any GMT zone defined by humans. What kind of status will time become? I was motivated by all these inspiring factors to make these paintings.

Speaking about medical plants, in my paintings you can spot Pacific yew and Podocarpus nakaii that are used to treat a wide range of cancers and are now nearly extinct due to environmental exploitation. I can't help but to imagine that they could be disappearing without anyone noticing if scientists never discover their medical effect. They are preserved only because they are 'useful'. So many factors are entangled. Just like the bamboo and flora in traditional landscape painting, I depict these plants in my painting while attempting to hold a formal balance in between reality, my personal feeling and language of painting.

Josefina Nelimarkka :

In Shiu's work, I can find different ways of collaging time, multiple layers from geographic to geological towards the sociopolitical and beyond, multiple events within time. It is very stimulating to learn more about his research and think what the painterly language encapsulates.

Svalbard is such an interesting place offering so many different aspects. Yet the Global Seed Vault also faces a risk of the future because the permafrost is melting and it is not so cold there anymore to protect the seeds. I have used aerosol data measured Svalbard in my work.

SHIU Sheng-Hung :

The mentioned Podocarpus nakaii, used to be widely seen in places like Sun Moon Lake during Japanese colonial time. In the exhibition I quoted some written words by Japanese researchers who specialise in high mountain species, the forest scenes of Taiwan Cypress and Podocarpus nakaii they depicted are no longer there anymore. I could only rely on these old time documentations to imagine the landscape back then.

Josefina Nelimarkka :

All of these details are valuable and part of the painterly approach. Relying on the process is also resistance to the outcome-orientedness. Even a lot of the art is forced to think through the outcome which is contradictory. Doing long-term research and having a painting practice oppose this, it is about being surrounded by the subject, being with the subject for a long time. It becomes a rebellious act.

The process is the possibility because it allows all these questions, subjects and complexities overlap and become a multiplicity with different times and perspectives. To move between the actual and speculative, between the intuitive and poetic, between the scientific, ecological and political. Freedom to travel in time, to shift in scale, to imagine the future. An undefined way of approaching things is important in today's world. There is a risk of over description in art.

SHIU Sheng-Hung :

When I make paintings I always kind of improvise instead of following a planned sketch, I welcome the unexpected that can trigger my next move with the brush. Of course there is a risk of ruining the previous

status that I' m satisfied with, but maybe the not so perfect part will be followed by a brand new inspiration, I enjoy this status of painting a lot.

Josefina Nelimarkka :

Freedom is important, open-endedness in process and in definition. It is important to keep this intuitive and uncertain aspect in the discussion because otherwise there is no space for art.

WU Hung-Fei :

Really appreciate that we have this opportunity to open up so many interesting topics. Our conversation began with color and landscape that play key elements in both your practices, then we go deeper to touch the complexity you discovered, which brings us back to the very essence of your art, the process and the freedom of being uncertain. This perspective is indeed something that needs to be valued in such a precarious world. Thank you!