

Sun Over Swamp

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— JESSE BIRCH

The West Coast has its bright, clear days where all is revealed, but I favour the gray mists, the rain obscured Islands and the clouds that hide the details. However much we desire order and clarity in all the details of our lives, there are always unexpected events that could cloud and change our course.

—Takao Tanabe

Sun Over Swamp is an exhibition that takes its title from a 1964 painting by Takao Tanabe and features five artists who consider ecology through diverse approaches to abstract painting.

In Tanabe's *Sun Over Swamp*, a brushed yellow rectangle hovers over splashes of ochre and umber, and hatches of turquoise and slate. With Tanabe's title in mind, we can begin to unpack what we are observing beyond composition and colour. The sun and swamp not only balance and reflect each other in this painting, but they are also interrelated ecological forces. Swamps are nourished by the sun and, in turn, trap carbon in living plants, soil, peat, and sediment.

Our bodies also revel in the sun's energy, and like swamps, they are porous and mostly liquid. We are all viscerally interconnected and dependent on one another for collective care. As individuals and communities we are tied to our place and time, while entwined with an earthly network of beings and ecosystems.

Working on canvas, linen, wood, and ceramic, artists in *Sun Over Swamp* reflect on our fragile yet globally interconnected biomes. From tracing the environmental footprint of their materials, to employing storytelling, mythology, artificial intelligence, and embodied learning in their processes, Rebecca Brewer, Azadeh Elmizadeh, Rita Letendre, Gailan Ngan, and Takao Tanabe consider unknowably vast and complex lifeworlds through the practice of abstract painting.

In the West, painterly abstraction has long been tied to artists' desire to "grab hold of the intangible".¹ American Abstract Expressionism developed through the influence of Surrealists and other European avant gardes (many of whom fled to New York from the rise of fascism), and as a response to an uncertain world. For many, the horrors of World War II and the rise of the Atomic Age made representational art seem quaint, if not impossible. Some artists saw abstraction as a turning away from mechanized violence and towards a new way of understanding their place in the natural world. As artist Joan Mitchell expressed: "I paint from remembered landscapes that I carry with me... and remembered feelings of them,

1. Gabriel, Mary. *Ninth street women: Lee Krasner, Elaine de Kooning, Grace Hartigan, Joan Mitchell and Helen Frankenthaler: Five painters and the movement that changed modern art*. Boston MS: Little, Brown and Company, 2018. p.35

which of course become transformed. I could certainly never mirror nature. I would like more to paint what it leaves me with."²

In Canada, **RITA LETENDRE** expressed similar sentiments, but saw herself as connected to a much broader understanding of nature. She considered her work to be entangled with all life and all light in the solar system. As she expressed: "Light, from the first shock at birth to the last breath, is life."³

While Letendre's mature work radiates its own unique energy, it took years for her paintings to evolve, and early on her practice was tied to specific art movements. In Quebec, she was first associated with the Automatistes and the group's total rejection of representation and rationality. Later, as she began to work with more geometric shapes, she was linked to the Plasticiens and their interest in structured forms. However, Letendre's work didn't fit perfectly into either movement. At different times her work could have also been associated with expressionism, lyrical abstraction, colour field painting, or hard edge, post-painterly abstraction, but influences from outside of the art world were equally important.

2. Ibid. p.565

3. Letendre, Rita, Wanda Nanibush, and Georgiana Uhlyarik. *Rita Letendre: Fire & Light*. Toronto: AGO Art Gallery of Ontario, 2017. p.36

Letendre was from the Abenaki Nation, but working in a white male dominated modernist tradition, she downplayed the idea that her Indigeneity was a factor in the development of her art practice. As curator Wanda Nanibush articulates in her essay accompanying Letendre's 2017 solo retrospective exhibition *Rita Letendre: Fire and Light* at the Art Gallery of Ontario, this was likely due to a resistance to being pigeonholed. As Nanibush explains:

Throughout Letendre's lifetime, she has felt constrained by how people wrote about her work through the lens of being an Indigenous woman. Today we can be more nuanced and less reductive. We can recognize that being an Indigenous woman has influenced her because it's part of her spirit, even while it's not all that goes into her work. For instance, Letendre maintains that her taste for striking contrasts between bright or warm colours and stark blacks has its source in her Abenaki heritage. The wedges and arrows in traditional Abenaki art suggest potential influences, and point toward a long Indigenous lineage in abstraction.⁴

Letendre's work was informed by all the things that made her who she was, and by 1974, she had settled on her signature combination

4. Ibid. p.20

of blended bands of luminous colours struck through with wedges or arrows. It is these works that are most tied to an embodied response to her environment, and in particular to sunlight.

From her 7.5 × 6 meter mural *Sunforce* at The University of California, Long Beach, or her massive, 18 × 18 meter *Sunrise* on the Neill-Wycik building in Toronto, to paintings like *Land of Eternal Sun*, *iSTAR*, and *Zoor*, featured in this exhibition, many of her later works spoke to solar and celestial forces. Through large dynamic bands of colour optically vibrating across their surfaces, these works bring the energy of her subject into relationship with the bodies of viewers. Her paintings are made to convey a sense of the sublime in nature as both an image and as an experience. As she said: "I love all life, that of rocks, plants, animals, man. And with great force and, above all, a great desire to live, I express everything that asks only to flow through me"⁵

The sun can cast shadows and render sharp lines with precision, a swamp, on the other hand, is always abstract. It is soggy, porous, and unstable. Where the land stops and the water begins is not always clear, and we pay the price for this ambiguity in soggy socks. Everything in a swamp is interrelated, but these connections are

5. Ibid. p.48

murky. When we observe algae, beetles, and submerged stumps, and then see ourselves reflected in the water, we are engaged in a process of abstraction.

REBECCA BREWER pays careful attention to swampy and sunken worlds: those we might encounter in the backcountry, and those we navigate in the wilds of our dreams. Brewer looks to psychoanalysis, psychedelia, and art movements from surrealism to the 17th century Dutch Sottobosco (undergrowth) painters for inspiration. Sottobosco artists brought dark and detailed still life paintings out of the studio and into the woods. Their uncanny compositions feature decaying plants, fungi, snails, toads, and other beings on the boggy margins of the forest floor. The paintings were not made from a top down human point of view, but from a low and creaturely perspective. For recent paintings, Brewer pushes swamp aesthetics further into the unknowable by feeding descriptions and keywords from her inspirations, and her own artworks, into artificial intelligence programs like DALL·E, creating new abstract images generated from an algorithmically filtered collective unconscious.

Brewer translates the digital outputs into objects through heavily textured and saturated oil painting. A recent work made for this exhibition seems to depict an abstract dragonfly alighting in a fractured swamp. This abstract insect, however, does not appear

to be separated from its background—it too has fractured, and is one with its shattered environment. This merging is likely due to mistranslations of artificial intelligence, but it is emphasized by Brewer's thoughtful application of materials. The iridescent properties of the insect are dispersed across the entire picture plane through the artist's use of luminous interference paint.

These blurred boundaries closely resemble the way that French intellectual and surrealist Roger Caillois (1913–1978) describes animal camouflage as not simply a defense mechanism, but also “a peculiar yielding to the call of ‘space’... a failure to maintain the boundaries between inside and outside, between, that is, figure and ground.”⁶ For Caillois (and Brewer) the separation of object from its biome is a social construct; all beings are born as one with their environments. We all start out abstract.

This merging of the figure and the ground, animal and environment, self and other, is also prevalent in the work of **AZADEH ELMIZADEH**. For *Sun Over Swamp* Elmizadeh has developed three new paintings that centre around water as a cultural force. Water is a constant transformer that circulates through our bodies with the same ease that it flows down tributaries, settles in basins, and

6. Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*. Boston: MIT Press, 1994. p.155.

condenses into clouds. In mainly arid regions, like Elmizadeh's native Iran, the preciousness of water, combined with its disrespect of boundaries and the fickle manner in which it appears, has informed both agricultural practices and folk tales.

Through her research, Elmizadeh has been gathering myths and stories in which water is a central element. She is particularly interested in tales that feature Peris, winged characters derived from the ancient myth of *Anahita*, the Mesopotamian goddess of waters. Originating in *Avesta*, the sacred book of Zoroastrianism, the Peris were first considered demonic and deceptive creatures. Later, under Islamic influence, they took on the role of benevolent spirits. Peris are known for their ability to shift from human to animal, and even to merge into the landscape. Elmizadeh's sequence of paintings in *Sun Over Swamp* depict Peri in a process of transformation. They are human and bird, water and fish. They are all of these things and yet not fully any of them.

Elmizadeh sees parallels between the movement of water, the fluidity of storytelling, and the transformative act of painting. She works in a vertical format to reference manuscripts, and employs flattened perspectives inspired by Persian miniature painting. Thin washes of oil are applied to linen, and then drawn elements are added before further additions of paint are brushed on until the works are ready to share. Even when these watery worlds have

dried enough to be installed on the walls of a gallery, their stories are unsettled, shifting in meaning and message depending on their surroundings, and their audience.

Stories of water, earth and sun are baked into **GAILAN NGAN'S** ceramic sculptures. Clay is the stuff of swamps. It comes from granite that has decomposed for millions of years before being carried away by volcanic ash or wind, or washed along by rains, rivers, and streams, before settling in ancient wetlands. People have been working with clay for well over 30,000 years, and we have such a deep historical and cultural connection to this material that tales of humans shaped out of clay by gods are common throughout world religions and folklore. These storied ties, however, become compromised in the face of modern open pit mining. From bricks to smartphone memory chips, the ceramic materials that surround us exist through industrial abstraction of both the land, and of human relations.

Ngan's clay forms appear to rise organically from the ground as asymmetrical stalagmites, but these objects came to life through careful manipulation by the artist's hands, and their decorations are informed by both the natural and industrial sources of her materials. Ngan's studios in East Vancouver and on Hornby Island are full of objects that she has made, found, or inherited: from beaver hewn sticks to radioactive glaze chemistry and other ceramic substances.

Many of these materials provide ingredients for production and others provide sources of inspiration and reflection. All of them have different stories and carry different weights in her life, and in the world.

While she was trained as a potter, and works with clay, Ngan often refers to her practice as painting. Western art has naturalized painting as oil or acrylic on wood or canvas, but paintings made with clay and other earthen materials on stone long predate these “conventional” materials. In decorating her works in *Sun Over Swamp*, Ngan utilizes locally sourced clays, ash from shore pine trees that grew in Hornby Island's Helliwell Park, along with materials like chrome, cobalt, yellow ocher, rutile, and burnt umber that are associated with both painting and ceramics. For the works in this exhibition Ngan draws inspiration from both the coastal environment she grew up in, and the abstract and colour field paintings of artists like Tanabe and Letendre. Through her organic forms and careful use of materials, she is both physically and aesthetically inserting the landscape into painting.

TAKAO TANABE also brought the land directly into some of his early work. The earliest painting in this exhibition, *Untitled* from 1950 features layered washes of black oils over yellows and red highlights. While the contrast and depth in this painting is striking, its texture is also significant. Tanabe layered sand onto

his canvas before scraping it off in places emphasizing both colour and form. This work was made as Tanabe's voice as a painter was first emerging, after graduating from the Winnipeg School of Art in 1949, but before he moved to New York in 1951 to study with renowned abstract expressionist Hans Hoffman. Tanabe continued to emphasize the materiality of his paintings when he returned to Canada. *A Landscape With Trees* from 1956 was left with exposed margins of canvas on either side of the painted surface, and the hard edged painting *Cloud* (1962) was made so that the work juts outwards off of the wall. Tanabe's watercolors on paper, like *Sky* from 1952, bleed and blur as if they are still wet after more than 70 years.

When referring to Tanabe's “white paintings” like *A Region of Landlocked Lakes* (1958), friend and mentor to Tanabe, Joe Plasket, argued that they are simply landscapes: “‘What are these ‘white’ canvases?’ Plaskett asked, addressing the reader/viewer. ‘At first sight you say ‘abstract’, the artist Takao Tanabe says they are landscapes’”.⁷ These early abstract paintings may be considered landscapes, but echoing Joan Mitchell, Tanabe also said they came from within. They were “never about looking at the land and then

7. Tanabe, Takao, Ian M. Thom, Nancy Tousley, Jeffrey Spalding, and Ronald Nasgaard. *Takao Tanabe*. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2005. p.74

making some decision about abstracting it, they were just paintings that consciously or unconsciously, for me completely unconsciously, conveyed the idea of landscape.”⁸ Tanabe’s early works can be both abstract and landscape. That’s the thing about abstraction, we can’t approach it looking for a clear definition. No matter how much we think we know, abstraction always leaves room for interpretation. It is in abstraction that we sit with discomfort, and work through ideas beyond words.

Sixty years after Tanabe’s painting *Sun Over Swamp* was made, the intensity of solar radiation and the swamp’s ability to trap carbon are increasingly out of balance. Clear cuts, mines, and pipelines have redrawn the terrain, while our new “fire season” colours the horizon in a gray orange haze. In a world where we witness famine, genocide, and ecological breakdown happening in real time, perhaps accepting abstraction as a way of being, and valuing the entanglement of all lives, is the only way forward. We are not only individuals tied to our own place and time but also intertwined with a global network of ecosystems. If we understand ourselves as tied to everything under the sun, the stakes change. We need abstraction now more than ever.

8. Ibid. p.73

REBECCA BREWER (b. 1983, Tokyo, Japan) is an artist from the unceded and ancestral territories of the *x̣ʷməθkʷəy̍əm*, *Skwxwú7mesh* and *Səlilwətaʔ/Səlilwítlh* Nations also known as Vancouver, Canada. Brewer’s work is an investigation into painterly abstraction and multi-stable perception via automatism, landscape and figuration. Works include oil painting, printmaking, textiles, sculpture and installation elements, and are laterally influenced by the artist’s research into somatics, neurodivergence, esotericism, queer and critical disability theory. Brewer received an MFA from Bard College (2012), and a BFA from Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design (2007), where they have taught as non-regular faculty since 2013. Solo exhibitions include Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver (2014, 2016, 2023), the Frye Art Museum, Seattle (2020), and a two-person show at Oakville Galleries, Oakville, Canada (with Rochelle Goldberg, 2019).

AZADEH ELMIZADEH (b. 1987, Tehran, Iran) is an Iranian-Canadian visual artist based in Toronto, Canada who works between painting and collage. She holds an MFA from the University of Guelph and a BFA from OCAD University and Tehran University. Since 2020 Elmizadeh has presented solo and two-person exhibitions at Sea View (Los Angeles, US); Tube Culture Hall (Milan, IT); the Southern Alberta Art Gallery (Lethbridge, AB); and Franz Kaka (Toronto, CA). Her work has been exhibited internationally at Europa and Harkawik (both New York, US); Public Gallery (London, UK); Anat Ebgi (Los Angeles, US); The Blackwood (Mississauga, CA); Kamloops Art

Gallery (British Columbia, CA). Elmizadeh's work has been written about in *Hyperallergic*, *Frieze*, *Border Crossings*, *Blackflash Magazine*, *The Globe and Mail*, *The Editorial*, *Canadian Art* and *Elle Canada*. She was the 2020 recipient of the Joseph Plaskett Award in painting. Elmizadeh has presented at fairs including Art Toronto, Nada Miami, the Armory Show in New York and Frieze London.

RITA LETENDRE (1928–2021, Drummondville, Quebec) is one of Canada's best-known Abstract Expressionists. Her works, ranging from small pastel sketches to painted murals, often feature a strong sense of movement and bold slashes of colour. Of Abenaki and Quebecois descent, Letendre moved with her family to Montreal in 1941, later enrolling in Montreal's École des Beaux-arts. A year into her studies, she discovered Paul-Émile Borduas and the Automatistes and left school, spending most of the 1950s working and exhibiting with the avant-garde group. Letendre would ultimately find her niche in Abstract Expressionism. By the 1960s, she had earned an international reputation, and was exhibiting in Montreal, New York and at the National Gallery of Canada, which has several of her works in its collection. Over the past four decades, Letendre's work has been featured in solo and group exhibitions around the world. She is an Officer of the Order of Canada, and has received the Order of Quebec as well as a Governor General's Visual Arts Award and a Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal.

GAILAN NGAN (b. 1971, Cumberland, BC) works and lives in Vancouver and occasionally works from Hornby Island, BC. Her practice involves pottery, sculpture and co-managing her late fathers' art estate. Ngan collects material from many sources—commercial and gathered from nature. Her ceramic sculptures accumulate layers of fused surfaces into compositions of texture and colour. She graduated with a BFA from Emily Carr University in 2002. She has shown work at Cooper Cole, The Apartment, San Diego Art Institute, Nanaimo Art Gallery, Art Gallery at Evergreen, Kamloops Art Gallery, Unit 17, and The Vancouver Art Gallery. In 2015 she received the North West Ceramic Foundation Award.

TAKAO TANABE (b. 1926, Seal Cove, BC), lives and works on Vancouver Island. Tanabe is an important figure in Canadian painting and printmaking with a career spanning nearly 75 years. Dominated by strong horizons and vast expanses of water and sky, his landscapes of BC's coasts fluctuate from delicate and misty to stormy and brooding. Interned with his family and other Japanese-Canadians in the BC interior during the Second World War, his art studies included the Winnipeg School of Art, the University of Manitoba, the Brooklyn Museum Art School, Central School of Arts and Crafts, London, UK and Tokyo University of Fine Arts, where he combined painting and calligraphy with travel in Japan. A distinguished art teacher and arts advocate, Tanabe taught at the Vancouver School of Art and was head of the art department at

Acknowledgments

the Banff Centre (1973–1980). Tanabe’s work has been exhibited nationally and internationally, including in a 2005 retrospective at the Vancouver Art Gallery, and is held in public and private collections throughout the world. The artist holds numerous awards and recognitions, including the Order of Canada, the Order of BC, the Governor General’s Award in Visual Arts and the Audain Prize for Lifetime Achievement in the Visual Arts.

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