

Being with Water

By Michelle JN Lim

Photographer Ng Hui Hsien's latest body of work is a series of analogue images made in collaboration with elements like light and water, that invoke infinity and introspection.

Brushing past the roughspun draping curtains, you leave the warm orange light of the exterior to enter what appears to be a dimly-lit room. A series of small prints pepper the four walls in an undulating arc, while a light projection sprawls on one end of the space. In the low light, it's as if the layers of each print are shifting into one another. Nothing is definitive, nothing is pinned down. Your eyes acclimatise – or is the light changing? You peer at the pictures, willing yourself to come to realisation.

With a colour palette that slips from blush to dusky plum and indigo, the prints in *Being with Water* claim kinship with twilight skies and desert landscapes. Soft lines turn into sloping shapes that drip or fade away. A light in the dark, an eclipse. Others, possessing shapes of more determinate form, recall mountain and rock. These evoke a mystical lyricism that typifies Chinese ink wash paintings, or *shuimo hua* (水墨画).

Whatever associations this body of work calls up in the perceiver, there is a sense of porousness to them. They do not so much prescribe an experience as they evoke a mood that inspires a daydream. Like sand on the shores of one's consciousness, they possess a gentleness that shifts, embraces and envelops.

A silence that opens

Acoustic ecologist Gordon Hempton remarks in his book, *One Square Inch of Silence*, that “silence is not the absence of something but *the presence of everything*... It is the presence of time, undisturbed... Silence nurtures our nature, our human nature, and lets us know who we are.”

In similar fashion, spending time with *Being with Water* slows our existence, inviting us to pay attention to the currents swirling within us. Its quiet minimalism holds a space for stillness seldom offered in contemporary existence. By leaving the city's hustle and bustle at the door, we're offered a pause that counterbalances the culture of efficiency and instrumentalism that we necessarily exist in – especially in this technocratic island-state. In this silence, we have the room to pay attention to subtlety – whether in the exterior world or within ourselves.

“A territory of otherness”

Though evocative of landscapes, the artist arrived at this body of work not by capturing likeness; the usual operandi of a photographer, training their camera on an external world. Rather, she does so by manipulating material: water, ice, light, the occasional piece of wood and stone. Working with these elements in analogue fashion, the works are a record of a constant negotiation, an interplay between the artist's will and the nature of the elements.

The artist draws parallels between her explorations in her art practice and her forays into the Chinese martial art Wing Chun, having begun both around the same time during the pandemic. “A lot of the philosophy behind Wing Chun has to do with water – about not forcing or imposing your ideas on how things should be onto the situation, but to be adaptable while grounded in oneself,” says Ng. “And also to be calm in the chaos of combat. Ideally, your mind is calm, like the surface of still water.”

Her comment brings to mind Korean minimalist artist Lee Ufan's observation of how “in East Asia... there is a tendency to emphasise a territory of otherness in relationships with natural things like animals, plants, stone and earth”. In not centring the human ego, the work leaves room for the infinite to emerge.

Water's multifarious nature comes through; at times calm, at others, mercurial. Its otherness is at once familiar and alien – how like the capriciousness of human emotions, yet also, how unfathomable.

Ichi go, ichi e (一期, 一会) – one time, one meeting

While the process of making the works is a dynamic one, the prints themselves are static. They primarily capture a memory of being with water, and are an effect of the artist's interaction with the element. No longer alive and uncontrollable, the water of these prints are traces of actions past. The mercurial memory that they record, however, brings to mind the Japanese concept of *ichi go, ichi e*.

This concept commonly associated with Japanese tea ceremonies, is more often used to refer to treasuring the beauty of an encounter because of how that exact moment cannot be repeated in one's lifetime. Considered in this context of the non-human encounter, similar notions of serendipity and chance arise.

Ng's interactions with the water are no less a convergence of time, space, material, thought and circumstance – and no less *sui generis* – as an encounter with a stranger might entail. One might see the preciousness as an exhortation to be fully present in the moment when being with nature.

The show as a portal; the door as a threshold

Individually nameless, each print hovers in place and adds its voice to the larger whole. It's a poem of a show where each work is a stanza. Bookending these prints are the amorphous light projection, and the constant orange glow that you'd left behind.

This projection is a blurry entanglement that your eyes struggle to parse. You will it to sharpen into focus, but this moment never arrives. The welcoming glow of the light beyond the curtain inverts the expectation of interiority and exteriority, inviting you to contemplate homeliness and welcome.

Which feels more welcoming? What feels like home? Though the door is a threshold between inside and outside, the definitions are permeable and the exhibition space itself feels like a liminal zone in which the abstracted landscapes on view possess a sense of immensity.

Lee speaks of "works of art that derive their legitimacy from a relationship with the outside world" as "exud(ing) an atmosphere of inexhaustible infinity". As you walk the length of the room – a full loop – traversing ideas that enfold, overlap and coexist, this notion rings true.

References:

Hempton, Gordon. *One Square Inch of Silence*. 1st ed., Free Press, 2006.

Lee Ufan, 'On Infinity' (1993), in *The Art of Encounter*, trans. Stanley N. Anderson (London: Lisson Gallery, 2004) 12-16.