The Space Between: Looking at Paintings by Monica Tap

by Stuart Reid

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I am simplifying a little here, since I am pretending there are only two players in this drama: one object and one person looking at it. But seeing and being seen is more complicated than that. Say you're in a museum, looking at a painting that has a number of people in it. There may be up to ten different ways of looking involved: (1) you, looking at the painting, (2) figures in the painting who look out at you, (3) figures in the painting that look at one another, and (4) figures in the painting that look at objects or stare off into space or have their eyes closed. In addition there is often (5) the museum guard, who may be looking at the back of your head, and (6) the other people in the gallery who may be looking at you or at the painting. There are imaginary observers, too: (7) the artist, who was once looking at this painting, (8) the models for the figures in the painting, who may once have seen themselves there, and (9) all the other people who have seen the painting – the buyers, the museum officials, and so forth. And finally, there are also (10) people who have never seen the painting: they may only know it through reproductions like the ones in this book or from descriptions. A complimentary source of complexity comes from the fact that we never only see one image at a time. - James Elkins

One of the most profound factors in looking at paintings is the passage of time. There are works with which one has a sustained relationship over decades: some may be in our possession, others are in museums we visit again and again. The fascinating thing about looking at something over a lifetime arises from the simple fact that while we age, the painting stays relatively the same. Our physical body changes, our ideals, our hopes our sensitivities, our ability to look and to pause – all alter as time goes by. Like the eyes of an old friend, the painting is a static marker upon which we gauge how much has passed, revealing our own fleeting youth and the inevitable approach to mortality.

There is a beautiful still life in the art collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto by the French painter Jean Baptiste Siméon Chardin called *Jar of Apricots* that I have loved for thirty years. It depicts an ordinary domestic scene – a table top cluttered with teacups, glasses, bread, fruit, a wrapped package, a wheel of cheese and a majestically tall jar of apricots. On a school trip in grade 7 or 8 – perhaps one of my first memories of visiting the AGO – I saw the work and bought a postcard of the image that I kept for years. When studying art history at York University in the 1980's I wrote a paper about composition based on *Jar of Apricots* and had opportunity for in-depth examination and contemplation of its elements.

Every time I've gone to the museum since, and I go quite often, I've made a point of seeking out the painting and spending a few quiet moments with it. It has shifted locations a few times as the museum that houses it has reconfigured itself, growing and expanding. The walls that it hangs on have changed colour many times and often it has new neighbors, works from the collection, adjacent to it.

I have noticed how different aspects of the work have been significant for me at different points of my life. I have been continually delighted by the delicate colour, the stillness of the setting, the luminous light that freezes a moment from one particular day almost 250 years ago. Across the great expanse, I can still hear the sound of the spoon clinking on the rim of the delicate china cup or the rustle of the paper package tied with string, the dull thud of the knife being set down on the edge of the wooden table. The painting gives evidence of the day passing, objects converge by necessity in quiet simplicity and pictorial harmony for only a moment. There is a peace and reassurance in this work where time gets caught and held as if for me, providing a meditative window, truly a "still life," through which to judge the passing of my own.

Almost a quarter of a millennium has passed since Chardin painted *Jar of Apricots* and the visual world is a very different place, but still the painting affords a profound resonance. The present day kaleidoscopic convergence of time, places, people and images creates a myriad of relationships, like many acts of seeing described by James Elkins in the passage used to open this paper. Perhaps the break-neck speed of the modern world and the flood of visual imagery that modern technologies bring create a craving for the opposite: an opportunity to stop, to pause and look at the larger continuum in which we situate ourselves.

The paintings of Monica Tap reflect the complexity of looking and seeing in the modern world – they also compress time to allow for reflection. Tap has written: “My task to date has been less to comment on the past than to attempt to reconstitute it as a part of a meaningful dialogue with the present.” Tap integrates a backward glance and layered references to the history of art. She finds emotional resonance in work by artists from other times and she pulls those images into the present for new investigation. Walter Benjamin has written: “Every image of the past that is not recognized by the present for new investigation as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.” Tap specifically seeks out works that are marginalized by their medium or subject – landscape drawings or sketches, for example, by artists better known for their paintings, which run the risk of being overlooked or considered merely as preparation or support within art history’s imposed hierarchy.

An aspect of Tap’s working method follows the tradition of teaching painting whereby students would copy works by the masters. In her thesis exhibition for the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, mounted at the Anna Leonowens Gallery in Halifax in 1996, Tap painted a series of works based on the floral still lifes of the 17th-century Dutch artist Rachel Ruysch. As a painter of Dutch origin herself, Tap was interested in Ruysch as a forebear. Tap’s paintings examined the construction of illusion and artifice in that body of paintings. In the written thesis that accompanied the show, Tap acknowledged the importance of reproduction and appropriation in this work: “The realism of the finished picture owed more study to the study of composition and colour than it did to direct observational painting. By consulting books of botanical engravings, copying other paintings, and drawing inexpensive plants in season, flower painters created hyper-realistic pictures that were a triumph of trickery.”

In an interview with Robert Storr, from the catalogue that documents his Museum of Modern Art exhibition in 2002, Gerhard Richter says: “I never wanted to hold and capture reality in a painting. Maybe at a weak moment I did, but I don’t remember. However, that was never my intention. But I wanted to paint the appearance of reality. That is my theme or my job.” Tap also paints the appearance of reality but distinctly from a contemporary angle. Over the span of time separating Chardin and Ruysch from Tap, the appearance of reality has become a kaleidoscopic layering of converging histories.

Within the paintings Tap has completed over the last five years, we glimpse layers of drawings from other times. Those drawings in turn document another artist’s codification of a visually transcendent experience. This confluence of time and looking is filtered through Tap’s own considered system of making. She has made choices of colour, composition and format that evoke shifting sensibilities, proclivities and curiosities of her own: a sketch by Joseph Albers prompts colour choice, a painting by Willem de Kooning influences composition, a visit to the Gerhard Richter show in New York enhances critical rigour and enthusiasm. Her reliance on the accumulated knowledge of art history that contributes to her audience’s extensive visual vocabulary and on the technologies of appropriation offered by machines and computers, all enable her mediation of imagery. For all the distancing devices she employs, the trace of the labour implied in the act of painting still marks the passage of time.

Tap works in the dark, projecting slides onto canvas that is stretched on the wall. She traces the marks in paint, giving flesh and blood to line with mass and colour of juicy pigment. The original marks are enlarged to a point where they breathe differently – they are no longer enmeshed in a representational structure, but have come unhinged, allowed to float freely on a newly expanded ground. The marks were a tiny, quick gesture at origin but now they take longer to reproduce – Tap cannot repeat the same mark made in its original time in the same way.

Tap has most often utilized drawings by the 17th-century Dutch and Flemish artists – Jan Breughel II (the Younger), Adam Pynacker, and Gaspar van Wittel among them – but she also draws works by artists from renaissance times through to 19th-century to her lexicon. A drawing by Vincent van Gogh, sensitive rendering completed on a windy hillside in Arles, gets endowed with new life as Tap uses it as the skeleton for a proliferation of layered marks. Tap will layer several drawings (or repeatedly layer a single drawing in various colours) onto a canvas. She composts layers of history until the original image is subsumed into a dense nest. However, vestiges remain of the original, hints of characteristic gesture, evidence of the rhythm of the artist’s hand and the motion and thrust of the original composition. She thereby sets up a hybrid situation wherein representational images made from abstract marks are in turn transformed into abstract paintings, abstract paintings themselves encoded with representational imagery.

This exhibition encompasses several series of paintings by Monica Tap from the past five years. The *Panoramic* series from 1997 is the earliest, its source matrix a landscape drawing by northern renaissance artist Jan Breughel II (the Younger). Tap has tried to fit the original rectangular drawing onto a square canvas – reducing the breadth of the image, flipping it left to right, compressing the marks into lyrical formations.

Panoramic: red and blue combines hot red and cold blue lines on a neutral grey ground. The convergence of the marks and the contrast of these strong colours cause the image to optically pop in and out of the foreground. There are still legible references – for example, to foliage or to flat surfaces of a road or earth cut by the vertical marks of trees – but the square is texturally saturated, negating a central subject. The lines are delicate and trailing, leading one's eye to rove the surface without rest.

A few years ago, there was a craze for a novelty item called "Magic eye" pictures, or "single-image random-dot stereograms," as they were also called. These brightly coloured, densely textured mosaic-like pictures contained three-dimensional images. If one unfocussed one's gaze from the surface of the stereogram, a parallel viewing of the double images embedded in the surface would occur. Tap's painting provokes a similar urge to refocus, to relax our hold on perception, to make our brain stop reading the lines on the surface as landscape references, and to let the hidden imagery emerge.

The painting suspends a moment when a mirage of cross-hatching, lines dots, dashes and squiggles suddenly clarifies into a recognizable image. Tap thereby releases the marks from the chore of creating the illusion of deep space on a flat surface: instead they form the basis for a new calligraphy deploying a playful language that shifts in and out of legibility.

Tuscan:blue and orange from 1998 affords a fine example of the dynamism f the calligraphic mark in Tap's painting practice. This work takes it's cue from an ink drawing of Tuscan hills by Leonardo da Vinci. The lovely wistful lines traverse the surface, conjuring airiness, wind, motion, and plunging distance. The electric orange and blue (complementary colours incidentally used by the artist to mix the background shape) spark and crackle across the surface of this painting. Critic, Matthew Hart, who eventually bought the work for his own collection, wrote of the painting's effect: "Part of the pictures success lies in this amazing depiction of rushing time, an Arcadia that seems at odds with the eye-bugging velocity of the whole." By projecting, enlarging the freeing marks from their ground, Tap allows the surface of these paintings to be kinetically charged – the speed implied is by keeping with the method of appropriation that pulls information from, say, 1519, in the case of the drawing, up to present day.

In the series of square canvases from 2001, encompassing *Black (fallow)*, *Green (orange)*, *White (current)* and *Yellow (yellow)* the artist has layered a single drawing in intense formations, limiting the palette of each panel, creating what at first appear to be monochrome tablets. The square format seems to act like a viewfinder, focusing our attention on one segment of an infinite subject. Tap has layered oil, acrylic or enamel paint, each with its own consistency, slickness and sheen, the brushmarks take on different qualities in the various materials: the enamel is thin and shiny, the acrylic is thick and plastic, the oil more subtle in colour. Black (fallow) seems at first glance to be a void, a black square, but closer examination reveals the subtle light effects on the surface. Yellow (yellow) also has a subtly coloured surface of luminous golden hues embedded with ochre, green, brown, white, and cream. The intensity of the yellow that occludes the underlying marks casts a glow like sunshine reflecting off a field of grain. How appropriate that the marks pay homage to a Van Gogh drawing, for the rhythm and intensity of the strokes are unmistakably his.

These four canvases feel super–saturated compared to other works in the show. They are deeply charged with information and strong colour, provoking an almost physical reaction on the part of the viewer. Such dense patterning calls to mind the energy, colour and dynamism that infuse Islamic art and architecture through use of infinite repetition of abstract or semi-abstract pattern. This pattern is applied is applied to all surfaces democratically, everything from a small box to the glazed surface of the monumental dome of a mosque – everything is unified in decoration. This application implies evenly amongst the various surfaces of transient earthly life, and is also a constant reminder of the power of the infinite that courses through the living world. Tap leads the viewer into a similar appreciation of pattern and repetition, albeit in concentrated layering rather than a lateral application over a vast surface. The

contained surfaces of Tap's paintings are infused with activity – energy emanating from the layering of recording systems harkening back to intense observation.

In his essay called *Painting and the Death of the Spectator*, Charles Harrison argues that: "History suggests the range of possibilities for significance in illusionistic painting is defined by the notional extremes of a detailed and readable figurative scenario on the other hand and an all-over blank surface on the other – between the painting that is all iconic detail and the painting that is all expressive atmosphere." By taking detailed source material and through her conceptual approach creating a surface that is densely saturated almost to the point of "blankness," Tap for her past encompasses both ends of Harrison's spectrum. While *Yellow (yellow)* is far from blank, it is, as the artist said, "full of itself," being a repetition of the same drawing countlessly layered. In terms of illusion, it implies potency and capacity within the visual void.

The larger works in this exhibition were completed during a residency at the Banff Center in the summer of 2002. These paintings see the artist loosening her system of application and playing more explicitly with paint and layering, perhaps the result of the shift in scale or her growing familiarity with the source material. Across a traditional course of study, the student presently becomes a master, too. With this body of work, Tap seems to be more conscious of the effect of the finished painting as such, rather than its merely providing evidence of a systematic investigation.

In the exuberant jungle-like mesh of cross-hatching called *Tangle* (2002), for example, it feels as if one is peering into a sun-drenched space through a heavy, dark curtain. The veils of marks become comforting, as if sheltering one from the intensity of the occluded colour. It is interesting but not essential to know that Tap has created *Tangle* by overlapping, flipping and layering enlarged projections of Van Gogh's drawing, *Park with Fence in Arles*, which depicts the centrally placed image of two brushes, framed by surrounding trees, with hardly any white space surrounding the image. Tap has layered luminous transparent glazes of yellow, sienna and magenta below black staccato marks, finally finishing with a smoky blue network of lines that spread a neon-like flicker across the surface. The painting has a swirling density, an overall hum that, providing no recognizable horizon line or figure to focus on, affords the eye no place to rest. There is a beat to the regularity of the slashed marks that sets up a rhythm – joyous, tropical and optimistic.

Also completed in 2002, *Memento* and *Lament* are each derived from the same set of drawings of water by various artists, applied in the same order, but with different colours. The drawings include sailboats and fisherman on grassy banks, yet the colours chosen are from watery. *Lament* is virtually a black and white image, painted in thinned enamel household paints purchased from a hardware store. The effect renders an almost ghostly x-ray investigation of the scene. *Memento* on the other hand is searingly hot: grapey purple sits on pink; fuchsia orange, buttery yellow and deep red overlap each other with a network of black lines criss-crossing the surface. These colours were inspired by a small abstract study by Joseph Albers, also called *Memento*. The layering of colours gives Tap's *Memento* a back-lit intensity not unlike that of a computer screen. In both works, the successive layers of drawing are interwoven in such a way as to disguise the order of application.

Both of these paintings render lines that seem to be carved out from the surface: the lines being the positive figures that reinforce the importance of the negative space. The spaces between the marks become as active as the marks themselves, almost as if the artist made the strokes to activate the ground. This relationship of ground and mark strikes balance. Tap's projection and enlargement of the lines has given each one individuality, allowing it to stand alone in its own space.

In 2000, Tap began to experiment with blow-ups of her own brush marks – splaying the signs and tools that visually construct illusionistic space at the far end of a microscope and pulling them up for a more thorough look. The marks are taken from her own test sketches, part of her preparation in choosing colour combinations for a canvas. The artist looked at these tiny sketches, each under 10 cm square, and decided to repaint the marks on a large scale of a canvas. The first experiments in the series were on a smaller scale – three of those featured in this exhibition measure only 51 x 51 cm. Subsequently, in 2002, Tap blew them up to a larger-than-life scale, measuring over two meters high.

Time itself was being flattened out in this exercise of Tap's. The artist laboured for hours on end over the articulation and simulation of tiny marks that originally taken fractions of a second to make. She obliterates any sense of their insignificance by pushing them up to a monumental scale. These works take on a journey into the guts of a sketch, the "body" of the work. The marks themselves are visceral, gushing forces, and yet baroque; embellished with beautiful painted detail that articulates their wet surface.

In *Mmmm*, as with the other large-scale brush-stroke paintings, the artist finds an entire palette within the black and white and grey scale. On a smoky grey ground, huge licorice-coloured forms whip around like a thrashing garden hose. The large positive forms seem carved out from the illusionary space of the painting, feathering off at their tips, and thereby suggesting a surrounding abyss. However, the works still straddle the threshold of abstraction, for these paintings are representations of abstract marks which themselves represent still other marks.

The spaces between these enlarged, engorged marks become a surreal infinity in which one is allowed to witness the push and pull of forces, the space between recognition and illusion. Evoking the transformation of a ground, Charles Harrison has noted how: "To cover a sheet of paper with writing is to make a virtue of its flatness, but to draw on a sheet of paper is to see that sheet as an imaginary world (or as a slab capable of sustaining a relief)." For her part, Tap dives into the small sketch to discover a new realm, deep inside the imaginary relief of the page, and eventually the canvas. And we in turn are made privy to the process of subliminal beauty made overt.

The space between marks in *Mmmm* partakes of a sense of balance and rightness not unlike that which we glimpse in Chardin's *Jar of Apricots.* Both of these paintings are still lifes, locating universally pleasing compositions and allegorical relationships amidst the most benign objects of everyday life. While Chardin looks to his kitchen table and finds a quiet beauty on the cusp of being overlooked, Tap discerns a deep pool of visual history encapsulated in the time needed to make the tiniest of sketches. She inverts our understanding of seeing, leading to examine the inner workings of painting itself. Time no longer holds any sway when the quick lick of a brush becomes an object for extended study, committed to permanence as it gets thrust in the hall of mirrors that contemporary looking entails. In the elongation of that moment , in the opening up of new opportunities to see , Tap provides us with the same ease of looking as does Chardin with his tablescape, Ruysch with her blossoms, Leonardo with his Tuscan hillside or Van Gogh with his dense foliage. Beauty sustains us in those pauses, and while these paintings or drawings hold fast, we are charged by the experience of each.

Stuart Reid