

TIME AND LIGHT: THE COLOURS CENTRAL TO MY PRACTICE ARE ABOVE AND BELOW THE HORIZON LINE

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ABSTRACT

Concepts surrounding Time and Light have been the centre of my practice since 2007. Influenced by Chinese philosophical practices, I understand time to be a part of the cyclical nature of life and therefore influences the material approaches I employ. This short essay looks at the use of colour in two interconnected bodies of work and how 'time' is a determining factor of these colours. It explores how earlier methodologies I have used within my 'time painting' series informs my approach to later works exploring Hong Kong's 'primary soil'. Through these two bodies of work I will explain the processes of creating and using colour within my artwork.

This article explores my two approaches to my practice, time painting and primary soil artworks, and their respective use of colour. The ground level is a metaphorical horizon line and a divide in time. My works can be categorised as, firstly, what is above the horizon line and exposed to light, that creates the gradients of yellow which are foundational to my 'time paintings'. Secondly, below the horizon line is the usage of primary soil excavated from underground as pigments for printmaking and how 'time paintings' are the referential material for the latter.

INTRODUCTION: TIME AND LIGHT

The choice and usage of colour within different bodies of my artwork have always been fundamentally linked to the exploration of concepts surrounding time and light. From my unique methods of 'time painting' (Lee, 2005-2006) developed in my earlier works to the exploration of 'primary soil' (Lee et al., 2022) within more recent exhibitions, time and light have driven the conceptual discourse as well as the physical, material processes I employ.

The relationship between the conceptual framework of time and light and the processes of making forms a kind of praxis. As a result, to understand the process of my work and the usage of colour, one has to understand my approach to the concept of time as they are intertwined.

The kind of 'time' I am interested in comes from Chinese philosophical practices where time is understood as part of a repeating cyclical motion, without a beginning and without an end (Major et al., 2012). Time is a fundamental rhythm of life for me. It is central to many of the ideas presented and forms the basis for understanding my work.



Figure 1



Figure 2

Figure 1. Shades of Time 2017 - 2022 (2017 - ongoing) Carol Lee Mei Kuen, Light exposed paper, each 1465 x 745 mm.

Figure 2. Wonderful 1960s (2015) Carol Lee Mei Kuen. Light exposed paper, 1035 x 2135mm

ABOVE THE HORIZON LINE: TIME PAINTING - SHADES OF TIME

'Time painting' is a term I coined to describe the combination of my conceptual approach and the process of creating my paintings. This approach to my work has been the foundational visual and artistic language since 2005. Taking advantage of the natural yellowing properties of book paper as the canvas, I control the amount of sunlight exposed to the paper's surface. There are no added chemicals on the paper's surface, so a long, arduous process of exposing the paper is often needed. As a result, the gradient of yellow represents the passage of time, making time as much a process and material of my work as the paper itself.

This yellowing from exposure to sunlight is similar to sun printing techniques such as cyanotype and chlorophyll printing. However, most importantly, where UV acts as a reductive tool in cyanotype and chlorophyll prints, bleaching and whitening the surface, UV creates an additive process in my work. Rather than removing the colour of the paper, it darkens and accumulates the yellowness and, as a result, 'accumulates time'.

This accumulation is the core of my ongoing series 'Shades of Time' (Lee, 2017- ongoing) (figure 1), where a grid of 365 squares records the passage of a year. Each square is different to the last, each square exposed to the sun a day longer than the other; the changing tonal gradients - from a faint eggshell, to warm yellow, to brighter oranges - are unique to the amount of sunlight it may have seen, and most likely irreplicable. Here, time is recorded through a systematic chromatic grid as a scientific experiment in light and colour.

Within earlier artworks in the time painting series, such as 'Wonderful 1960's' (Lee, 2015) (Figure 2) and 'Bits and Pieces 100 Objects' (Lee, 2013) (Figure 3), I instead use a variety of stencils created from found images, traced shadows to found objects, to make the imagery on the painting's surface.

My paintings are not fixed because no chemicals are applied to the paper. Where printmaking artists may search for the most stable pigment or long-lasting paper, I embrace this transient characteristic of book paper. These tonal yellows are constantly changing within the work. The layers of colours overlap, settle, flow and influence each other. Like a short moment in the lifetime of the material itself, an image may exist on its surface. But like history, as time passes, light accumulates on the surface. What we once knew as the painting may disappear into a sea of non-pictorial colour, undulating between shades of dark yellow and orange.



Figure 3

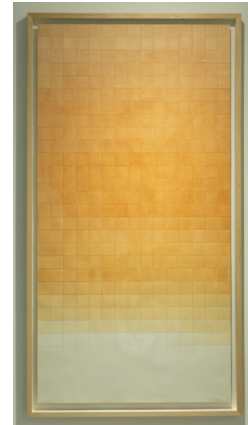


Figure 4



Figure 5

Figure 3. Bits and Pieces 100 Objects (2013) Carol Lee Mei Kuen. Light exposed paper, dimension varied
 Figure 4. B.Rd 24-28/1/100-2023.1, Carol Lee Mei Kuen, Soil pigment ink relief print on Awagami Washi Shiramine, 1465 x 745 mm
 Figure 5. Soil being pumped out of the ground at a construction site, in preparation for the foundations of a new building.

BELOW THE HORIZON LINE: COLOUR MINING - TOLD BY THE SOIL

B.Rd 24-28/1/100-2023.1 (Lee, 2023) (Figure 4) was the centrepiece to my recent exhibition, Told by the Soil - Stories of Victoria II: Colour Mining. (Lee, 2023) It is a relief print using 100 extracted colours from a single soil sample that references the chromatic experiments of Shades of Time - 2022.

The project began with a serendipitous encounter with a construction site on Bonham Road (Hong Kong) where a construction worker said to me 'This is the primary soil of Hong Kong. It has always been here.'(Lee et al., 2022) Looking at the fascinating colours of clay-filled earth pumping out of the ground and touched by his words, I imagined what could exist right below our feet, so close to us yet never exposed to sunlight. (Figure 5) What kind of history and time does this material hold? I began to imagine the earth under our feet as a separate and parallel timeline, a kind of 'object time' (Harman, 2018), a testament and witness to our human activity.

I imagined a line from the coastline to Victoria Peak (the tallest point on Hong Kong Island) (Figure 6) as representing human activity. As more people settled in Hong Kong, they started to move inland and skywards. I began searching for construction sites extracting earth for their foundations along that line. For me, these moments where clay is being extracted and pumped up from a depth of 9 to 70 metres, are points of intersection of my time and the earth's time. As the building foundations are finished, this land area will be once again unreachable for probably the rest of my lifetime.

Looking at the make-up of each soil sample, within it a plethora of different rock and clay types, I instinctually began to manually separate the particles into 100 different colours. I ground these particles into fine powder and placed them within a series of ampoules. (Figures 7 and 8)

B.Rd 24-28/1/100-2023.1 came about when the director of the Hong Kong Printshop, Yung, a printmaking artist herself, felt the grounded pigments extracted from the earth between her fingers.

Touching the pigment with my fingers, it felt as fine as dust. It was hard to imagine that this fine dust began life as Hong Kong primary soil, excavated from a depth of 38 metres below the surface at 24–28 Bonham Road.'

The granite yielded light-coloured quartz, pale-yellow and maroon feldspar, pale-yellow, brownish-grey and beige muscovite, deep-brown biotite, light-grey amphibole and andalusite – the colour variations of the primary soil. The boxes of greenish-yellow, olive green, amber, flax, sand, linseed and taupe-coloured pigments of all shades are the results of Lee's year-long soil processing.' (Lee et al., 2023, p.8)



Figure 6



Figure 7

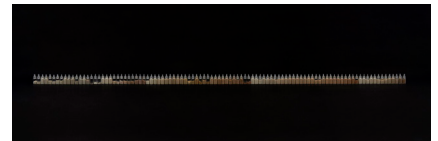


Figure 8

Figure 6. Map showing the construction sites where primary soil was collected along the line drawn from the coast to the top of Victoria Peak.
 Figure 7. The soil collected came from different ground levels, ranging from 9 to 70 metres.
 Figure 8. Pigments of B.Rd 24-28/1/100 made from the primary soil excavated from No. 24-28 Bonham Road.

B.Rd 24-28/1/100-2023.1 involved experimenting with the fundamentals of creating a printing ink. This involved the search from the correct binder to the best method of printing to the correct ratio of pigment to binder. Finally, body gum no.8 was selected and a ratio of 1:2 of pigment to binder created the ideal ink. Using the hundred pigments extracted from the earth, single-colour inks were created and a series of drawdown and tap out tests. (Figures 9 and 10) Different combinations of these 100 base inks were combined to colour-match and replicate each square of Shades of Time - 2022 (Lee, 2022).

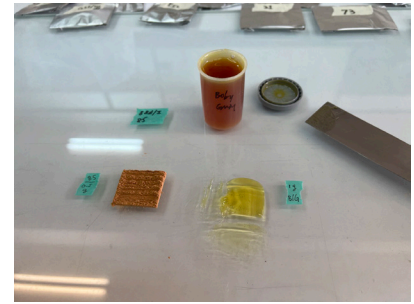


Figure 9

This work became the result of my experimentation in colour but also represents the intersection of my time and this construction site. Much like the time painting, it documents a kind of fundamental earth time situated within the materiality of the soil itself. Not only that, both the time painting and B.Rd 24-28/1/100-2023.1 document my labour time.

To conclude, time has always been a motif in my artworks and the colours result from the lengthy processes of making. Whether it is on the horizon, the traces of sunlight left on paper, or the primary soil below the horizon, they are all representations of time that have been collected and compounded over the years. This self-referential recreation of the colours of a particular day for me is like travelling back in time - a feeling of reliving the memories of that moment again.



Figure 10

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Figure 9. Searching for the best ratio between pigment and binder to create my own printmaking inks
Figure 10. Ink tests draw down and finger tap of the inks created

Lee, C.M.K., Chan, S. (2022) Told by the Soil - Stories of Victoria. Exhibition held at The Gallery of Hong Kong Art School, Hong Kong Arts Centre, Hong Kong, December 2022 [Exhibition catalogue].

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AUTHOR

Carol Lee Mei Kuen

Carol Lee Mei Kuen is a multi-disciplinary artist from Hong Kong who uses time as both the material and the narratives of her art practice. Using a technique she created called 'time painting', she records the passage of time through the changes in light and its reaction with paper.

Lee graduated from RMIT University / Hong Kong Art School with and BA in 2001 and MA in 2007. Her works are collected by the Philippe Charriol Foundation, Alexander Tutsek-Stiftung Foundation, Germany, Lviv Glass Museum, Ukraine, M+ Museum, Hong Kong Open Printshop, Hong Kong Heritage Museum and Hong Kong Arts Centre, and other private collections.

IMAGE GALLERY



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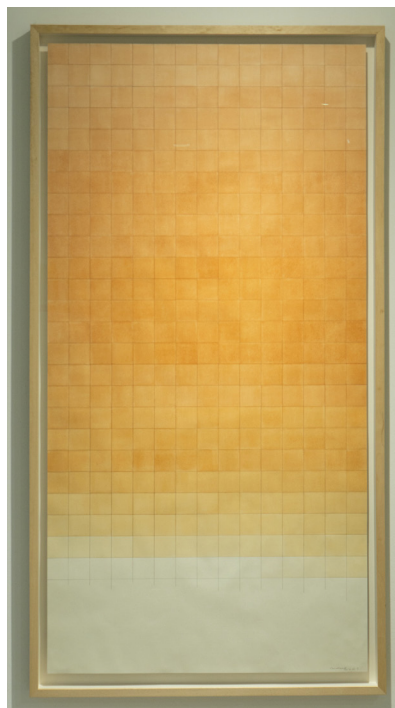


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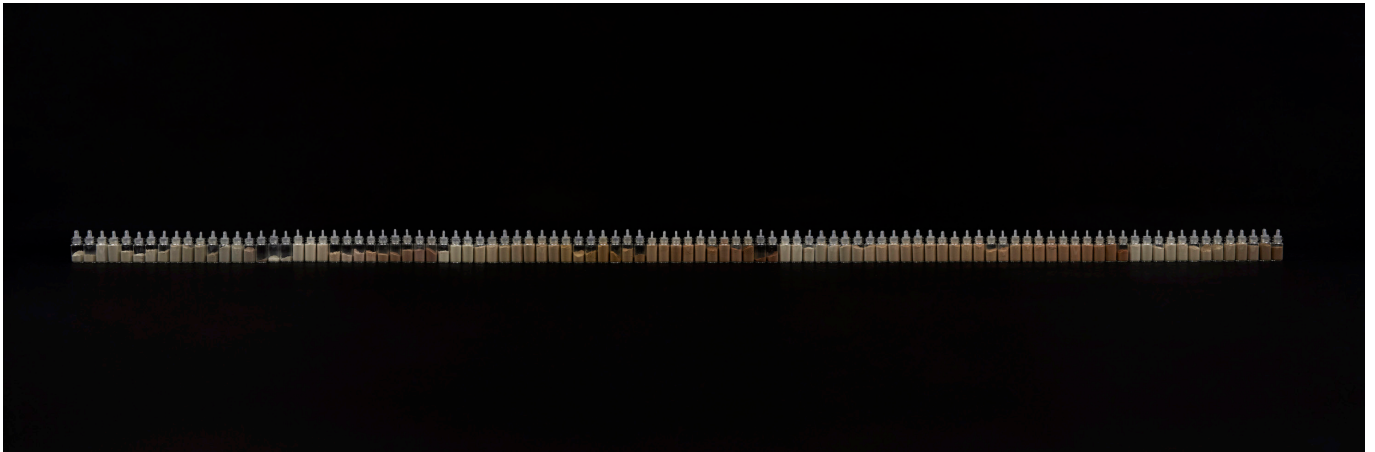


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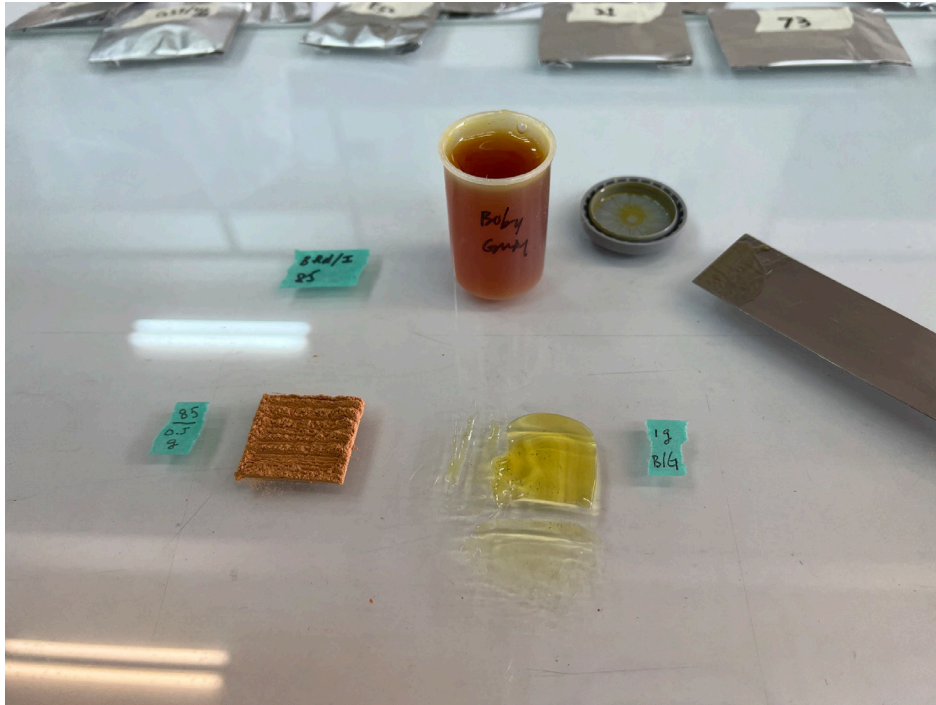


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