

Blue Monday Su-Mei Tse

4 September 2026 –
31 October 2026

Su-Mei Tse - *Blue Monday*
Text by David Khalat

For Su-Mei Tse, music evokes memories, but since her recent exhibitions the artist has increasingly engaged with vulnerability and how to deal with it. It is not about ignoring the current crises, but about encountering the uncertainty that results from them in everyday life. The title of the exhibition, “Blue Monday”, refers to the music of the 1980s. It evokes a kind of ‘Monday hangover’ state: a feeling that is not entirely clear, but carries something positive within it. Despite this ambiguity, the exhibition is marked by a fundamentally affirmative, at times light-hearted attitude.

The 1980s, and in particular the New Wave and post-punk movements, were a formative period for Tse; it is the rebellious mindset and the possibility of breaking out of given structures that interest her. The variations Tse presents in “Blue Monday (Variations)” (2026) show subtle shifts in color – a kind of playful attempt to reconstruct from memory the famous original cover designed by Peter Saville in 1988. “The six colors allow for 720 possible combinations,” as Tse explains, from which she selects four for the first time. The core and a thin circle are sharply drawn, while the rest takes on a painterly element with a chalk-like texture. Tse has a particular, almost analogue way of working with digital printing; what matters to her is the precise calibration of every detail. Her approach is analogue in the sense that the photo lab becomes her studio throughout the entire process. Working with a painterly eye, Tse almost meticulously removes the digital precision from the image in order to arrive at the desired texture. In this way, she translates the idea of these “memory images” through the original. The concentric, almost emblematic form of the image also develops a meditative quality.

The black-and-white image of a window used for the invitation card, opening the view onto a spiral staircase, is titled “The Scale” (2026). The title takes its cue from the idea of the musical scale and functions as a play on words and a field of associations between “ladder”, “scale”, “Tonleiter” and “l’escalier”. The photographic image thus becomes a kind of visualization of words that function as scales, representations and supports for perception. One might think here of Wittgenstein, for whom language and image do not simply explain reality, but are applied to reality like a measuring rod. His famous image of the ladder also seems to resonate here: one climbs it in order to reach another perspective and no longer needs it once this path has been completed. In this sense, the staircase becomes less an unambiguous symbol than a conceptual structure between language and perception.

Next to it, on a simple table consisting of two trestles, a tabletop and a lamp, stands “Unknown Pleasures” (2026), a work that refers to the iconic cover of the eponymous Joy Division album. This visual element, also designed by Peter Saville, was originally based on measured radio signals from a pulsar. Tse takes these frequencies, which originated from a natural phenomenon, and returns them to nature by meticulously redrawing them as a kind of mountain landscape. Rendered as a metallic three-dimensional drawing, they take on sculptural form: a visual soundscape that at the same time creates a mental

and existential space. Today, in the context of discussions around water and energy reserves and the expansion of human activity into space for new forms of energy production, the work acquires an entirely new dimension.

At the center of the gallery, “1000 Words for Snow” (2008-2026) consists of three large red megaphones from which the faint crackle of a record beginning to play can be heard. The word “signal” is interesting here, as megaphones are essentially signaling instruments used to transmit loud proclamations. Here, however, the loud message is silence. A silence that stands against the noise of the world, but also a sound that shows how silence itself can be a physical and temporal entity. In conversation, the artist emphasized the utopian idea of an oversized, extremely long tube mounted on a pole so high that it would extend towards the sky, beyond sight and hearing, and yet could be perceived as all-encompassing – propagating silence as a moment of pause within everyday life. Such moments have been described as an “aural parenthesis”: an acoustic bracket in which interruption does not signify emptiness but opens up a new space of perception.

In “Stille Disco” (2010), silence also becomes a carrier of memory: a perfectly designed ensemble of a record player, receiver and amplifier made of stone, which evokes the memory of the not-so-distant era of material, analogue music. In an age in which the entire musical memory of humanity can be accessed with a single click on a streaming service, the sculpture shows how archaeological these recently invented material forms of electronic technology already appear in the face of the accelerating technologization of everyday life. The recognizability of the design is connected to the emotional and symbolic value we attach to these material carriers of music and memory.

Here, “Rake” (2026) comes into play, a specially designed rake that Tse conceives as a kind of musical instrument and that also recalls her video work “Pays de neige” (2015). There, a landscape is treated as a tabula rasa and transformed into an empty surface that precedes any creative act. Alongside the erasure of traces, a monotonous crackling sound emerges from the sand and gravel, recalling a kind of “White Noise”. At the same time, with the “Rake” Tse refers to the Zen practice of raking Japanese gardens. The repetitive movement becomes a form of meditation and pausing, while also creating a heightened awareness of time. The lines emerge like a musical notation, extending as a kind of endless line through the landscape and opening up space for different “scores of life”.

Silence and suspension are conscious gestures in many of Tse’s works. In the new works from “Freudvolle Obertöne (Joyful Overtones)” (2026), fine ink marks appear between and, above all, beyond the staff lines. The exhibition first presents “Schmerzhaftes Zwischentöne (Painful Dissonances)” (2009), whose dissonances create tension for the classically trained ear. The “Joyful Overtones” emerge from these earlier works and conceptually continue the previous series. The “Freudvolle Obertöne”, by contrast, lightly accompany a fundamental tone, shaping its timbre. Here too, the perspective shifts: irregularity no longer appears primarily as a disturbance within an existing order, but as an additional resonance. Vulnerability does not disappear, but something else can resonate alongside it.

For Tse, the question is always how musicality can be perceived in everyday life and how the visual, poetic and sculptural shape can carry our lives. Pausing, repetition and shifting are less forms of retreat than ways of relating differently to the present. This present is never isolated, but is always framed by both past and future. “Being in Time” is not a static condition in Tse’s work: memories reappear, images continue to travel and materials carry traces of

what came before.

The idea of “impression” can also be understood in this context. Materials, bodies and things absorb traces and pass them on. We ourselves are part of this process. This circular movement can be found again and again in Tse’s work: the crackle of a record becomes a memory and the memory becomes a sculpture; an astronomical signal becomes a diagram, a record cover, a pop icon and finally a landscape again. Impressions travel through different times, cultures and materials, being inscribed anew along the way.

“Blue Monday” is therefore less about a nostalgic return to the 1980s than about being in time. The past continues to resonate in the present, changes its form and encounters us as a new impression. Perhaps this is precisely where the affirmative quality of Tse’s work lies: she does not ignore the uncertainty of the world, but transforms its heaviness and accusatory potential through attention and poetry, opening up a new perspective.

Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, § 2.1512 on the image that is “laid against reality like a measure”, as well as § 6.54 on the famous image of the ladder that can be thrown away after it has been used.

Cf. Christophe Gallois, “The Music of Meaning”, in: Su-Mei Tse: *Nested*, 2017, pp. 57–65, in particular on time, duration, memory, suspension and the interweaving of different temporal levels in Tse’s work.

Cf. Emanuele Coccia, “Metaphysics of Impression”, in: Su-Mei Tse: *Nested*, 2017, p. 120 ff. Coccia understands “impression” as a relational and material inscription through which bodies and things absorb, transform and pass on traces.