

# GALERIE FONSWELTERS

## Anh Trần - Now that we have settled by the water's edge

15 Oct – 19 Nov 2022

Dancing for Myself

---one day before the exhibition opening---

Martin Germann in conversation with Anh Trần

MG: *Searching the sky for dreams* was the title of an earlier portfolio you were sending me, but as a phrase it still hovers in your mind.

AT: *Searching the sky for dreams* is a title which came when I was doing my master. Everyone at the time that was looking at net art, digital, post-internet art was popular at my art school. But I wasn't doing that, I was a painter. The title you mention is trying to reconcile of being a young artist at the time who would still make abstract painting. That wasn't that popular I guess, it would be cooler to make video, like Hito Steyerl or so. In this new show (at Galerie Fons Welters) I have used it as the title for two paintings who look pretty much like each other - have the same composition and I made them at the same time, I mirrored them somehow - but they turned out quite differently. They both have the title *Searching the sky for dreams*.

MG: At some point in your life, you decided to go into painting – but what brought you into this practice? I see that you are combining various sorts of colors and techniques but grounded in a multiplicity of historical references, especially towards the heroic Western Modernism - how would you see those in respect to what *freedom* means to you?

AT: I thought painting was almost the only option to make art, because as a visual art student I had only the visual reference of Vietnam. I didn't know you could make sculpture or other medium. So that just started like that easily and organically, it stayed with me throughout my practice now, for more than 12 years now.

At the beginning I started to paint a lot of landscape during my bachelors and normally the landscape is imaginative places from the pictures are never real. I have never been to these places. When I get into my master it turned into abstraction, because I've discovered that the more that I get into the paintings, the more I realize that there is a hierarchy in the history of painting. While discovering Abstract Expressionism through my research a feeling of being excluded arose, from where I tried to answer the question who has the right to abstract painting. That's how I started making the kind of work that I am making right now. Of course, I started rather small and rather minimalist. Asking who has the right to do abstract painting is what interests me you, now, in the contemporary art world. At the time, maybe what I was looking at is abstract expressionism, especially American postwar and that is just right after the Vietnam war. These normally are white male painters. Freedom here is for me to being able to imagine if white male, if they

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would still alive, and still doing what they tried to do then or doing at the time, I was just curious what would be the resource of that.

MG: How do you make the works exactly – rather fast, or in long, exhaustive processes? I only saw them on screen by now, I am in Tokyo – you are in Amsterdam - but to me they appear very physical, impasto-landscape-ish, as well.

AT: Normally I start with the paintings on the floor. I found out it is the easiest way to gesso them. It doesn't drip because I tend to gesso and primer or prepare the canvas quite thinly and watery, and I like them to lay on the floor just for the gravity purpose. They are in fact very physical, on the floor or on the wall, vertical or horizontal. It is interesting that some performers or dancers really like my works. They seem to recognize some movement in it, as if you dance. I also consider the painting process of my practice almost as a performance. Dancing in a way – just for my myself, it is me in the studio with the paint, the canvas, and the brush. You can imagine they happen quite quickly, and the execution happens indeed quite quickly. I can make a work in one or two days. But finish one takes month, because I tend to work on multiple canvasses at the same time. Before I start a new series there is normally a gap, it is called life (laughs) - there is a lot going on. It takes a while from the day from when I go to the paint canvas factory to the day it is finished. In a nutshell, I can paint very quickly. But a lot going of other things are going on in between, such painting and reading.

MG: Now that you mention it, are you good in finishing?

AT: ....yes, it basically can only happen when you are in the space with them. That comes from my idea that my painting practice is almost like a performance. I tend to then feel more pressure and there is a certain kind of attitude when the work is hanging already in the gallery or the exhibition. Actually one of the works in this show I just finished yesterday.

MG: Earlier you told me about the term “Provisional Painting”, which was coined by the writer Raphael Rubinstein in Art in America in 2012, in respect to painters such as Raoul De Keyser, Mary Heilman, or also Michael Krebber. Do you still see yourself in a line of these artists' practices – and what would your specific addition be?

AT: I can't believe that this term is already ten years old! That's crazy. Well – Yes, yes - and no. That article and terminology I guess is one of my starting points, back then when this article came out and I could read it. But I think these days my making is more complicated. I would rather think that I am doing many provisional paintings in one painting - and then it becomes just a normal painting right.... [laughs] but the attitude towards the canvas has remained quite similar which is to work gestural, quite expressionist, with quick brushstrokes. It is a push and pull process, of taking and thinking, and also different signs of speed happening on the surface as well. I do not know about the second part of the question, if I identify I myself with it – no one actually would say this in public. No one considers a question like this in public. I guess my contribution to that field, is obviously my participation in the 58<sup>th</sup> Carnegie international. And in a way, my use of painting is like using something someone else already did – so

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for me it is a little bit like a found object. Fundamentally I think I started a bit with a bit anger, and I also needed something to work against.

MG: I am sure that everyone needs something to work with or against. But how do you relate to pragmatism and adaptation, are you confronted with a lot of issues in terms of translating? In your life you also changed the environments a couple of times.

AT: Adaption is so important for me - I tried to adapt a lot and to learn new things. To some extent it is of course also a bit opportunistic. I often say I *am* not a painter, also in other interviews. It was never my main goal. It is a little similar to learning the English language, I had to learn it every day. It is the same with painting. It is not my mother tongue. When I go back to Vietnam for a holiday I become a completely different person, another part of my identity. The same with painting. I don't have a studio now - I hardly do any work. I realize there is no point for me, I could do ceramic everyday anywhere, but with painting I need a certain space.

MG: You were studying tourism in New Zealand before you embarked into the fine arts - do you have a certain use of those studies?

AT: After one year I quit. It was so hard. I don't know why I even chose it - I thought it would be easy to get a job as well. but there is a lot of management and business involved in the tourism industry. In fact, I can only use it in buying an airplane ticket, (laughs) I have a certain trick or system. I remember the code from the airport, those three letter codes. Once I also tried to name my works that way but quickly realized that it is not a good idea.

MG: You told me that you were considered as "Other" in New Zealand, which is of course a very heavy term which is not so fashionable to use anymore - but I think it still exists in this way or the other. What does that mean to you, is it a position which is even appropriate for to make art, today?

AT: No - I think it is there, although no one talks about it or says it to me. It is my subjective feeling. Maybe my New Zealand friend think that about my. I don't know. But just to be aware it is there. The same as the old question - who has the right to abstract painting. It is old fashioned. But I think it is important to be aware. When I am in the studio and paint, then I don't think about these questions at all. I don't think about any political standpoint or position. I just think about being the human, being a good human first. But to make good paintings which you need to make to be a good human being. But when I don't paint I try to navigate and reconcile with these questions to reflect. Before or after a show, I have to reflect upon what is there. It is almost like a two-barrier process, but at some point they might intertwine again, obviously in the titles again...

MG: The art historian Robert Storr once divided the abstraction in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in referring to a grounded or an ungrounded world. Where would you situate your own practice here?

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AT: Maybe this sounds a bit black and white – for me it is more, it is about the internal relationship. Between me and the work – me and the work versus the outside world. I like to have a balance a between both. When I physically paint, I am usually disconnected. Maybe this disconnecting becomes a sort of isolation sometimes. That why it is important to have a stable life outside of the studio, to have friends and people I meet. It is really important to have a community. That is the grounded part in the work, with which I can connect to. Back in the studio awaits me the battle I have to pick myself, no one else can have that say. I have to decide what I go to paint and how I am going to do that. What do I want to do, what does this work look like on this thing. In regard to grounded or ungrounded – the artist essentially have to decide for themselves. It is about where you are coming from and who is surrounding you.

MG: As a last question: What does color mean for you?

AT: Color for me means feelings, that is the most direct answer I can give, it can be even representation. As a painter I don't like to participate in the conversation figuration versus abstraction. My view on color also depends on the life-time period, this really effects the color palette. A lot of these new works use primary colors. There is a pink, the venetian pink. It is a bit more yellow... On the painting it looks a bit more like baby pink, especially during the last few months. It is just like purity, this color. I don't think any of the color in my work is realistic, and sometimes I push this barrier even further. Even surrealist, surrealist colors which doesn't sit in real life. Like to assemble maybe a river, it can be yellow it can be blue, it is just a metaphor. It is never a real river, rather my yearning towards to landscape or familiar space. The color for me is quite internal. I always say this I have no prediction, maybe I have a bit control how the audience and viewer sees the works, but everyone has a different experience with the light, which is of course because of their psyche. The main message here is that the color in my mind is not so unreal. I just have to provoke that the audience to imagine something as well. Maybe for them it is not a river or so but something else – but they should also feel warm, universal, connected. I like it if my work is able to connect you to a another human being.

MG: A pleasure to talk. I wish you all a nice opening tomorrow!