

Bradley Ertaskiran

Ben Tong

The Universe Tastes Like Blueberries

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While gazing up at the sky one afternoon, Ben Tong had a thought: *the universe tastes like blueberries*. It felt like a transmission from elsewhere, a revelation. The notion is not so far-fetched; astronomers have confirmed that a dust cloud at the centre of the Milky Way is made up of ethyl formate, which is responsible for the flavour of raspberries. This feels like the process of much of Tong's work: a kind of open receiving accompanied by curious investigation, translated through paint. In turn, the paintings (and the artist) hold a quality of listening: they are alive, both perceptive and perceiving, yet hover in a moment of stillness.

Tong's work is inspired by the phenomenon of light. If light is both a particle and a wave, equally material and immaterial, this perfect paradox manifests in Tong's paintings. Energetic marks and strokes encounter swathes of rich, bare pigment, like patches of dense activity amongst a void, not unlike the universe itself. In making these new works, Tong contemplated spectroscopy, a technique in astrophysics that uses the light spectrum to figure out the composition of stars and planets, and how light is absorbed and emitted by different types of matter. It is a field that lends itself well to art making, for long have painters defined and revealed the materiality of our world through light. Consider Cézanne's apples or Monet's haystacks; light shapes the object, and the object refracts the light. Tong's world is full of gleams and deep shadows; light defines and is defined by what it illuminates.

In addition to a curiosity gleaned from the realm of physics, Tong is driven by expressive and instinctive considerations of colour. Blue has been a recurring palette in his work, an enveloping shade that both grounds and swells like the comforting expanse of the night sky. Smudges of coral and acid green vibrate against their navy backdrop. Fiery yellow and orange radiate beneath veils of dark purple. The pigments take on an energy of their own: they screech, they soothe, they pulsate. Oscillating paint strokes, sometimes in the form of dots and dashes, other times in broad sweeping gestures, add a rhythmic quality to his compositions, like radio waves moving across the canvas. This repetitiveness also imparts a sort of digital quality to Tong's paintings, like a pixelated image illuminated by a blue screen.

Across the peaks and troughs of pulsating marks, vaguely discernible forms surface: the curling petals of a flower, a cat turning mid-air, a running faucet. And yet, Tong rarely plans his paintings' trajectories, painting with a certain intuition, like receiving signals from the beyond. Tong adds layer upon layer until an image begins to reveal itself, gently resurfacing a submerged treasure from the depths, then tenderly guiding it into its final form. Regardless of what emerges, be it a dreamy landscape or a busy constellation, there is a comforting deliberation to Tong's work, as if all of its moving parts lined up at the right moment to create this new life. And the result is tart and sweet.

Ben Tong (b. 1981 Toronto, Canada) is based in Los Angeles and holds an MFA from the California Institute of the Arts. His work has been exhibited at Night Gallery (Los Angeles); Commonwealth and Council (Los Angeles); K11 Art Foundation (Hong Kong); Art Basel Film program (Hong Kong); Jack Barrett Gallery (New York); Europa NYC (New York); Kling and Bang (Reykjavik); Gallery Vacancy (Shanghai); and the Hammer Museum (Los Angeles), among other institutions. He was a fellow at the Villa Aurora Foundation (Berlin) and in residency at the SOMA Summer Program (Mexico City).

The works are presented in collaboration with Jack Barrett, New York.

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