

STEPHEN WONG CHUN HEI

Between Sun and Moon

16 May – 5 July 2025

Quotidian Sublime

"In modern Athens, the vehicles of mass transport are called *metaphorai*. To go to work or come home, one takes a "metaphor" – a bus or a train. Stories could also take this noble name: every day, they traverse and organize places; they select and link them together; they make sentences and itineraries out of them. They are spatial trajectories."ⁱ

Recently living with Stephen Wong Chun Hei's nightscape of Hong Kong's Tai Tam Dukⁱⁱ for five days (collectively a long-haul, intensive forty-odd-hours) at Art Basel Hong Kong, and consequently witnessing *literally* thousands of people bump and jostle to view, photograph and judiciously inspect every single detail of the painting, as if they were experiencing something reverent, somehow conjoinedly equivalent or comparable to the *Mona Lisa* in the Louvre, or an 'actual' sublime landscape as viewed by Casper David Friedrich's frock-coated gentleman aloft a high rocky outcropⁱⁱⁱ, was as awe-inspiring as it was revealingly thought-provoking. That's a long sentence, but it was a lengthy queue... I'm entirely uncertain that I've ever experienced an artwork or a living artist that speaks to and/or means so damn (pun intended) much to its indigenous audience – at least so immediately. It's astonishing, transporting, and actually emotional. Hong Kong seems both justly proud and *in love* with this practice, with a passion that gives the impression of being one hundred per cent empirically genuine. The comfortable 'at home' of the audience (slippers and sofa) with Wong Chun Hei's work was however also somehow super-charged by its internationalised (orientalist) presence in the context of a 'foreign' gallery – a palpable rumour-mill was working over-time with "*have you seen there's a Stephen Wong on....*". Yet what does this mean to everyone everywhere else I wonder? How does it translate or transport? Does it? How universal is the particular and where do we place Wong Chun Hei's work in the deliberation of *genius loci*^{iv} versus the difficulties of exoticism and cultural-spoliation? What happens when '*Between Moon and Sun*', featuring nine new Hong Kong nightscapes, opens somewhere as distant and culturally distinct, as mother's tankstation | London, a small gallery in Bethnal Green. I honestly can't wait to see.

Compellingly complex thoughts rise to the surface regarding the work's relativity to and between the exotic and domestic, colonial/post-colonial, of problematic 'orientalism', yet for millions of Hong Kongers, Wong's paintings seem electrically grounded by the absolute quotidian. Conversations with individuals from the collective ABHK audience were as specific as the artist's particularist detailing; "my daughter goes to school right there" ... "I drive that road twice a day to-and-from work, it's really narrow... it used to be two-way, but it's now two lanes in one direction with traffic lights either end..." I didn't know that I needed to know that (?) "that could be my boat..." "People say the Triads use that spot down to the left to smuggle narcotics and cigarettes.. "I walk my dog there, but *not* down there..." etc., etc.

The moon reflects on the surface of the reservoir creating a natural 'street of light', echoed by the man-made parodic intervention/dangerous beauty of 'rivers' of incandescent light from street lights, cars, buses and distinctively tall and narrow Hong Kong trams (*metaphors*), their collective headlamps illuminating the path like glowworms. You can almost see into and smell the interior of the red cab at the bottom left of the painting, feel the pleather interior, smell it, slightly sticky in the humid heat. In broader terms, the illumination of the 'path ahead'... polemically and geopolitically, seems very much less certain at this moment in history, but the certitude and confidence of Wong Chun Hei's work seems to strip that all away. We feel safe here. I'm still asking why?

Collisions of the real and artifice: place and purpose, genius loci, paintings of 'somewhere else' for someone else, pose problematic debate: Claude Lorrain's travelling camera obscura to select desirably framing trees, Constable's Suffolk idyll, that *never* was, John Glover's curly trees and depictions of native primordial Arcadia that he *never* actually knew, Gauguin's unquestionably wonderful paintings of culturally explorative *otherness*^v, Van Gogh's savant workers, Albert Namatjira – there's a story here^{vi} – Fauvism (if there's purple in *them there* shadows, paint the shadows purple!); Vollard (dealer), Derain, Matisse (artists), the list is long and variously applicable and not, but gets somewhat closer to the complex references that Stephen Wong's work activates. Arles doesn't really look like a Van Gogh, or is that the other way around, nor does a Hockney have a particularly close relationship with the landscape of northern England, but Stephen Wong's paintings sort-of actually 'do' feel authentic. Standing high up on the peak road, overlooking Victoria Harbour, is kind-of like that! Wong Chun Hei's captures the heightened experience and even releases a memory locked inside of flying into Hong Kong, suddenly dipping right into the harbour and crazily landing in the thick of things, before the airport was re-sited (sanely, but less dramatically) onto reclaimed land on the peninsula, safely further off the island. In this instance mankind transported territory, conversely Wong Chun Hei transports us, swooping over and into space, in time, in between nature and *Blade Runner*.

Arguably, Wong Chun Hei's authenticism is rooted in his passion for hiking, walking and camping over prolonged periods through the hills and valleys of his potential subject sites. As a kind of intuitive, empirical cartographer, the *spirit of place* (genus loci) is narrativised temporarily – you can feel the forms as if walking into them, through them, floating above and tunnelling below them. Arguably there is something akin here to First Nation dot-painting narrativization of oral histories, traditional stories by which one might navigate a path, survive, flourish. If you read beyond the surface. Wong's colours are electric, back-lit almost. As a passionate Gamer, equal to the passionate hiker, the tones are vibrant as if the viewer has selected Gaming mode on the remote. Similarly the 'resolution' has been cranked up to 4K super-high-definition, maybe a bit more. There's a remarkable and conceptually expansive Latin expression, *amplissimum terrarum tractum*, which broadly indicates the complex sensation of being at a great height and having the out-of-body experience, seeing and feeling everything, all at once, all at the same time...^{vii}

It's somehow appropriate, that in writing this, we are on a plane on a flight from Hong Kong to Dublin, viewing big things as though collective multiplicitous tiny things, from on high, but in exact detail, *everything all at once*... As we fly into beautiful Ireland, our home... I think that if we ever had a Stephen Wong Chun Hei landscape. Which we probably never will, I would hang beside the perfect Irish landscape by Paul Henry, that we also do not own. I would spend years looking at them both, thinking how wonderfully, differently the same they were. We dream in ideals that are as-real-as-real.

ⁱ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, 1988. Trans. Steven F. Rendell. Pg.115

ⁱⁱ *Tai Tam Duk Reservoir under a Full Moon*, 2025, Acrylic on canvas, 100 x 150 cm

ⁱⁱⁱ How on earth did they get there dressed like that? Unlikely (not a mark on those shiny shoes... but let's put that down to the improbably transportation power of art. Spatial stories.

^{iv} Latin, literally 'spirit of place, from classical Roman, *genius loci* is a protective spirit.

^v Paradise, nudity, beaches... etc.,

^{vi} Albert Namatjira (1902-1959), an Arrernte painter from the MacDonnell Ranges, was said to be the late Queen Elizabeth's 'favourite' first-nation painter – formerly called 'Aboriginal' – whose watercolours, although highly skilled were a bit more like Bushy Heath than *bush*. Anecdotally, Namatjira gifted a watercolour to Elizabeth II, during one of her empire visits down-under, that the Royal collection thence lent to an exhibition celebrating the bicentennial of British occupation and colonisation of what is now called 'Australia', at the equally problematic Commonwealth Institute, London. Because the Namatjira, *Australian Landscape*, 1950, was from the HRM Royal Collection, it was affixed to the wall with security screws, the bit for which kept securely under lock-and-key in a safe. One night, the roof leaked, something fierce – somehow indicative of the decline of the colonial empire – directly over the Namatjira, which could not be removed as the safe required 'clearance' to open it. Water and watercolours being mutually exclusive after the event, there's a trans-locational-spatial moral somewhere about destroying something you profess to love... or at least claiming ownership of something you actually can't own, and then, its grey administrative bureaucracy raining on someone else's paradise? The amazing Glover, night Corroboree; *A Corroboree of Natives*, 1840 – which will live long in the memory as painting of enormous power – also included in the exhibition, was merely borrowed from the Musée du Louvre, Paris, and consequently not under such over-bearing restrictions, and was safely removed from said leaky roof. 'Stories of Australian Art', Curated by Jonathan Watkins. 1988.

^{vii} *Amplissimum terrarum tractum*, despite Google translate prosaically rendering it as "most regions...", its tentacles reach further; into the metaphoric narrative of the temptation of Christ, on high, being offered dominion, by his lesser half, of *all* that could be seen and felt.