

Into the Woods: Sun Yao's Animist Realm

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In a story told by my PhD tutor, Piet Mondrian who, as the threat of war increased, had decided to flee by train to London was collected from Paris by Winifred Nicholson. Given his famed animosity towards greenery, Nicholson was surprised to see him gazing fixedly at the passing French countryside. Asked about this, Mondrian replied that he was fascinated by the whizzing past of the telegraph poles. This flight from nature in the pursuit of a pure abstraction—one informed by Hegelian philosophy—stands at the opposite pole to the work of Sun Yao; and this despite the fact that the two shared similar artistic journeys from figuration to abstraction, since Mondrian initially developed his abstract forms from the study of trees, and of light dancing on water.

In direct contrast, then, to Mondrian and the tradition of geometric abstraction that springs from his work, Sun Yao's paintings offer a great variety of colour and monochrome, scale, source material and paint handling. Even in his most abstract pieces, complex natural forms are never far away. Sun Yao has made a sustained examination of Western painting from Van Eyck onwards, especially its range of brushstrokes and other mark-making, which he has related to the projection of the self into the world and vice versa on phenomenological lines, especially through readings of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty.¹

Yet compared with the Western painters most associated with phenomenology—among them, Cézanne, Van Gogh, Klee and de Staël—Sun Yao's work may bewilder the viewer since it brings into close juxtaposition many different kinds of mark-making with very diverse meanings and affiliations, and similarly combines abstraction and figuration. We may be startled, for instance, to see a coy figure which may have been borrowed from Victorian mythological painting (one of John William Waterhouse's nymphs, for instance) peeping out of a dense and fluid abstracted forest.

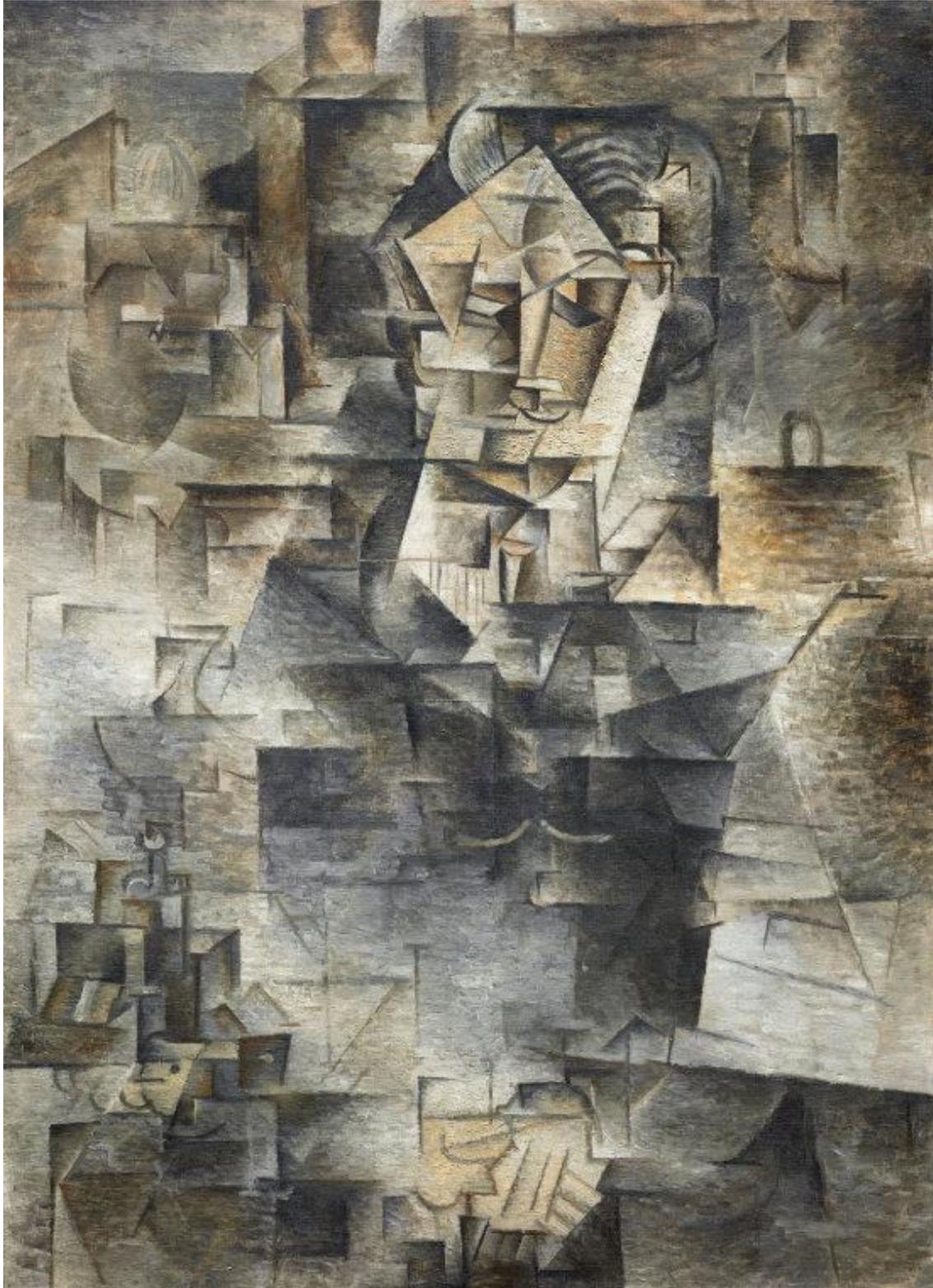
¹ This is the subject of Sun Yao's PhD thesis, 'Research into Brush Strokes and Texture in Oil Painting', China Academy, Hangzhou.



Deep Forest No.9, 2010

How, then, do we position Sun Yao's work with relation to the tradition of which he has made so deep a study? One way into this complex and curious question is to think of the distinction between analytic and synthetic Cubism. In analytic Cubism—to take one well-known example, Picasso's 1910 portrait of his dealer, Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler—the objects and forms before the painter are examined in the round, broken down and folded out to convey a new sense of space which tries to reconcile the flat picture plane and the three-dimensional subject. In the later mode of synthetic Cubism, which derives from collage and *papier collé*, objects are no longer the starting point. Rather, the painter begins with an abstract pattern, arranging it to make a

formal composition, and only at the last moment adds certain small visual clues that, say, turn an oblong into a newspaper or an oval into a face.²



Pablo Picasso, *Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler*, 1910

² See John Golding, *Cubism: A History and an Analysis 1907-1914*, Faber and Faber, London 1988, pp. 118-34.

Sun Yao, it seems, especially in the series 'Trace' and 'Deep Forest' does both at once—and sometimes in the same work. The ghost of collage is there in his strange insertions of borrowed figures into abstracted landscape scenes, which are themselves derived from an analysis of natural forms. This combination or synthesis, and the push and pull effect it has on the viewer, is part of a wider catholic quality familiar in postmodernism, a free borrowing of styles and subject matter from many sources. It is taken to an extreme in much contemporary painting, in which knowing and often ironic references to divergent traditions, styles and subject matter are made to provoke viewers, in an often cynical parade of art-historical knowledge and virtuosity. Sun Yao's work, as we shall see, is not of this type.



Vasily Kandinsky, *Small Pleasures (Kleine Freuden)*, 1913

The artist draws together elements of pre-modernist painting (particularly Turner, but also Rembrandt, Rubens and Delacroix), German Expressionism, Futurist dynamism, Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism. For example, there are references to the apocalypse (which we will

return to) as he builds a relation with Kandinsky's transitional paintings between figuration and abstraction, such as *Small Pleasures* (1913), and perhaps also with Ludwig Meidner's complex, skewed canvases of burning cities and their fleeing inhabitants. The strand of Surrealism which deals with landscape also seems present, especially Max Ernst's *grattage* paintings, in which various objects were placed under the canvas before it is rubbed over (like doing a brass rubbing of a church funerary panel) transforming the surface into something resembling an uncanny landscape. For Ernst, the deep similarity between surfaces at widely disparate scales was a way into envisioning primeval landscapes so that even the tame, sanded and planed surface of floorboards or a kitchen table can open onto a wild place, calling out to the subconscious.³ There is an affinity here with the way in which Sun Yao sometimes discovers forms by tracing domestic objects.⁴



Max Ernst, *The Forest*, 1927–28

The strange attractor of Sun Yao's work pulls it close to the primitivising aspects of modernism and to the wilder shores of expressionism. His works are by turns gentle and disturbing, harmonious and aggressive, and he sometimes draws on the anguished and violent aspects of Abstract Expressionism, especially in his paint handling, evoking De Kooning or even Twombly.

³ See Werner Spies, *Max Ernst Frottages*, trans. Joseph M. Bernstein, Thames and Hudson, London 1986.

⁴ See Xiyun Du, 'Miraculous Verve: Sun Yao's Overwhelming Phantoms', Powerlong Museum, Shanghai website, August 2022: [Ghosts make the gods happy: Sun Yao's terrifying vision \(qq.com\)](http://www.powerlong.com/ghosts-make-the-gods-happy-sun-yao-s-terrifying-vision-qq-com)

Sun Yao relates such painting to a time when he frequently had to move studios, and began to experiment with making ‘destructive marks’ with scrapers, rags and odd brushes.⁵



Gerhard Richter, *Abstract Painting*, 1991

There is, too, a parallel—if not a reference—to Gerhard Richter’s erasure paintings in which he first makes complex sci-fi-like paintings of airborne trapezoid shapes, which are then largely effaced with thick paint applied with a squeegee to produce smeary abstractions, and different paint layers part to reveal the under-painting. Similar paint handling can be seen in some of Sun Yao’s series ‘River Runs Through It’ series.

⁵ ‘New Exhibition Exploration no. 73: No Man is an Island’, *Art 24 Hours*, April 2021, p. 15.



The River Runs Through It No.1, 2011

In a well-known essay, Leo Steinberg wrote of the trajectory of avant-garde art as a continual process of ‘sacrifice’ of the qualities of its precursors, a ‘shrinkage’ or subtraction.⁶ It was not those who cared little for art who were bothered by, say, the Abstract Expressionist assault on composition but the previous generation of artists who were still closely engaged with questions of formal arrangement. Sun Yao, who has written of rebirth, and indeed of establishing his own personal Renaissance, is rather an artist of addition, snatching the bodies from the sacrificial pyre, and bringing back what was lost in the process of subtraction and purification.⁷

⁶ Leo Steinberg, ‘Contemporary Art and the Plight of its Public’, in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art*, Oxford University Press, New York 1972, pp. 6-10.

⁷ Sun Yao text in SPSI Art Museum, *Neverland: The Latest Works by Sun Yao*, Shanghai 2016, p. 107.

In thinking about the contrasting models we have for artistic characters and persona—among them, the savage libertine, the dandy, the bohemian, the shaman, the rational moderniser, the revolutionary, the cynic—a literary parallel to Sun Yao leaps out: Joyce Cary's extraordinary creation, Gulley Jimson. Sun Yao's techniques find an echo in Jimson's origin story: once pursuing an ordered and conventional life as a clerk, his path is forever altered when he takes pleasure in idly and then fixedly teasing out patterns and figures in a blot of spilt ink. This incident leads into a life-long obsession with painting, as he makes large intricate figure compositions, often of momentous mythological happenings such as 'The Fall'. Like Sun Yao, he feeds his art with a continual, passionate interrogation of his environment—especially the sky and the river:

Thundery day along Greenbank. All the willows standing still with their leaves pricked. Dusty green. Pale lilac shadows. Tarred road reflecting the sky. Blue to make you jump. A great cloud over on the Surrey shore. Yellow as soap and solid as a cushion. Shaped like a tower about a mile high and half a mile thick, with a little Scotch pepper pot in front. Dresden blue behind full of sunlight floating like gold dust. River roughed up with little waves like the flat side of a cheese grater. Dark copper under the cloud, dark lead under the blue. I could use that cloud in the Fall, I thought. It's a solid square.⁸

Such concerns produce a deep alienation from the society of instrumental modernity, and a comic dance, in the search for the money to sustain his art, with patrons, local officials and the law. There is a phenomenological and existential parallel here in Sartre's extraordinary account of Charles Baudelaire, as he too is incessantly driven to absurd acts by the profound difference between his own view of his artistic and personal freedom, and the expectations that society foists upon him—above all, the injunction to be useful.⁹

For Merleau-Ponty, such acts of seeing and speaking are 'irrecusable and enigmatic', and may have a distinctly 'wild' and unruly quality in which the viewer is possessed by what is seen, and in which significations cluster together in dense 'tufts' and 'thickets', escaping any singular definition. It is the 'very voice', he says, 'of the waves and the forests'.¹⁰

It has sometimes been noted that Sun Yao's work produces a Rorschach-like effect, as onlookers strive to read figures and faces into its swirling forms, some of them put there by the artist and others imagined by viewers.¹¹ This, too, has a basis in phenomenology—both that what and how people see is grounded in the specific characteristics of their bodies and minds, and that it is subjectively variable, based on their personal experiences and memories. Yet there is also pareidolia at work, the strong human propensity to see definite forms, especially figures and faces, in complex patterns. Evolutionary utility accounts for this: the consequences of not seeing a face staring out at you from the foliage are potentially much more severe than seeing one that is not there.

⁸ Joyce Cary, *The Horse's Mouth*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, Middlesex 1982, p. 143. First published in 1944.

⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Baudelaire*, trans. Martin Turnell, Hamish Hamilton, London 1949.

¹⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'The Intertwining—the Chiasm', in Clive Cazeaux, ed., *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*, Routledge, London 2000, pp. 164, 179.

¹¹ See, for example, Raul Zamudio, 'Sun Yao: Painting Between Being and Nothingness', in *Sun Yao: Traces of Metaphor 2010-2016*, Ge Jinyan, n.p. 2016, p. 10.

Sun Yao's work engages with complex fractal forms: nebula, clouds, waves and ripples, forests, flames and smoke. While much phenomenological thinking is wary of mathematical and scientific method, fractals are a way into thinking about the deep affinities between apparently diverse natural forms, including our own bodies. There is also a link to the dawn of artistic modernism: the mathematician Henri Poincaré, who was very important to the Cubists for his thinking about the fourth dimension, made a beginning with the mathematics of fractals.¹² In attempting to calculate the path of a speck of dust held in the gravitational fields of two planets, he found himself drawing a tangled skein of terrible complexity in which he could see no stability or rational pattern. While each calculation was simple, their sequence seemed to stretch into eternity without resolution: understandably, he gave up.¹³ It was not until computers were applied to the problem in the 1970s that fractal forms could be drawn and analysed.¹⁴

Fractals are self-similar at all scales. If you magnify the complex area of a fractal pattern, you will find that the same forms recur, no matter how many magnifications you make. In the same way a fragment of shoreline looks like the whole, and a twig looks like a tree. Sun Yao's source material differs markedly in scale (from images of microscopic creatures, through medical imagery to nebula), yet their painted visual quality is often similar.

Fractals, as well as shared genetic material, are a basis for the human propensity to animism, as found in myths and children's literature. The artist insistently draws on the animism that tempts us to see faces in tree trunks, or a multitude of animals and landscapes in cloud forms. To take one fractal landscape that concerns Sun Yao, the forest may alternately be a place of delight, fear and enchantment: in a famous animated sequence, Disney's Snow White flees the Queen's wrath into a forest at night, imagining that trees have become monsters with staring eyes, logs crocodiles, and branches clawed hands. Yet in the dawn of a sunny morning, the threatening eyes that surrounded her are revealed to be friendly animals that come to her aid.¹⁵ Across various series, Sun Yao gets at just this ambivalence: we see this in the spectral and uncanny forms of 'To the Stars', and in some paintings in 'River of Entropy'.

¹² On Poincaré and the Cubists, see Linda Dalrymple Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Art*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1983, pp. 71-3, 81-5.

¹³ June Barrow-Green, *Poincaré and the Three-Body Problem*, American Mathematical Society, Providence, RI 1997; the issue of fractals and their implications for predictive science is the subject of Liu Cixin's celebrated novel, *The Three-Body Problem*, Head of Zeus, London 2015.

¹⁴ See H.-O. Peitgen / P.H. Richter, *The Beauty of Fractals: Images of Complex Dynamical Systems*, Springer-Verlag, Berlin 1986.

¹⁵ *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Disney / RKO Radio Pictures. 1937



River of Entropy 201603, 2016

In the realm of animism, timelessness, or at least a different way of experiencing time, is often invited—one that is completely alien to timetabled modernity. In J.M. Barrie’s *Neverland*, time is apparently suspended. Peter Pan does not age, of course, but his followers, The Lost Boys, are also eternally children. Likewise, in the works grouped together under the term, ‘Neverland’, and in the series ‘Neverland Landscape’, highly complex, vaporous, liquid and dense forms seem to endlessly congeal and dissolve. Such a continual flow may bring to mind the eternally changing but cyclical time of any untouched landscape. Linear time is also the enemy of Barrie’s main characters: Pan loses his human friends to adult forgetfulness as they age; and Captain Hook is pursued by a crocodile that has swallowed a ticking clock. When the clock runs down, he will no longer be warned of its coming.¹⁶

In Sun Yao’s painted realm, there is another dislocation of mundane time—especially in the sometimes harmonious and sometimes discordant juxtaposition of styles, source materials and mark-making techniques. It is surely a response to the breakneck pace of Chinese modernity as it profoundly alters human life, the environment and the very ecosphere. This modernity brings different eras into close and jarring proximity in a harsh and hyper-visible conjunction of contemporary production, consumption and urbanism, set against much older ways of life.¹⁷ Sun Yao’s both points to the profound the dizzying and disorienting transformation, and offers visions of restoration. Naturally so, for the ideal vision of timeless animism, of coexistence with

¹⁶ J. M. Barrie, *Peter Pan and Wendy*, Hodder & Stoughton, London 1911.

¹⁷ This is not a new phenomenon, of course; for its effects on thought and artistic production, see Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Verso, London 1991, pp. 307-10.

a nature of which humans are an inextricable part, is threatened by ecological destruction, by entropic forces and by existential threats that can no longer be encompassed by the painterly sublime.

This brings us back to the apocalyptic elements in Sun Yao's work. Apocalypse, we should remember, not only means the destruction of the end time but also revelation.¹⁸ The artist's concern bears less on the huge Victorian painted fantasies of Biblical destruction, and more towards apocalyptic vision, as seen in Blake and Turner who experienced their own harsh temporal contrasts at the onset of the Industrial Revolution. If we think of Sun Yao's animist forests, we cannot but think also of the lengthy process of their destruction over many centuries (Robert Pogue Harrison writes of the Roman destruction of the forests of North Africa), fuelled by a concerted hostility.¹⁹ Such hostility is founded in a pervasive fear of wild forests, and at least from the Enlightenment onwards a disgust at their lack of utility—they should either be felled, or managed like a factory to maximise profit.²⁰

Is Sun Yao's project of rebirth, then, solely a matter of painting or does it bear on a wider ecological restoration which would be a repair of the health of the mind, society and the environment alike?²¹ In 1929 a Native American Omaha man remembered the land of his youth:

In both the woodland and the prairie, I could see the trails of many animals and hear the cheerful songs of many kinds of birds. When I walked abroad, I could see many forms of life, beautiful living creatures which Wakanda had placed here; and these were, after their manner, walking, flying, leaping, running, playing all about.

But now the face of all the land is changed and sad. The living creatures are gone. I see the land desolate and I suffer an unspeakable sadness. Sometimes I wake in the night, and I feel as though I should suffocate from the pressure of this awful feeling of loneliness.²²

There is in Sun Yao's work a telling oscillation between visions of all that has been lost, and those of a psychic, social and environmental restoration that is fervently desired—and not just by the artist.

¹⁸ For an examination of the concept of apocalypse, see Malcolm Bull, *Seeing Things Hidden: Apocalypse, Vision and Totality*, Verso, London 1999, ch. 2.

¹⁹ Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1992.

²⁰ Various novels have pointed to this near-pathological urge to destroy ancient forests: notably Amitav Ghosh, *The Glass Palace*, Harper Collins, London 2000; and Annie Proulx, *Barkskins*, Charles Scribner, New York 2016.

²¹ The model here is Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, trans. Ian Pindar/ Paul Sutton, Bloomsbury, London 2014.

²² Peter Nabokov, *Native American Testimony: An Anthology of Indian and White Relations: First Encounter to Dispossession*, Harper and Row, New York 1978; quoted in Amitav Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis*, John Murray, London 2021, p. 71.