

Guo Tiantian: The Realm of Collectedness
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“Where ecstasy begins, words cease.”

The initial encounter with Guo Tiantian's paintings leads one into a state of wordless absorption—“one stands before them and slips into an ephemeral visual departure.” Yet, to look further is to be “carried into another time and space,” lifted into a spiritual ascent akin to an awakening of sensation. Here, the uselessness of art reveals its use, dug out from the depths of human bewilderment. As Wittgenstein wrote in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, “What can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence.” Though “the limits of my language mean the limits of my world,” once we enter the wordless realm of art, we still seek an exit from these “limits.” In my view, art is silence itself—and also the key that unlocks it.

What, then, can be said, and what cannot? When building a bridge toward the spiritual in art, an artist must avoid being confined by “closure.” Unlike the often-constrained reality of daily life, art thrives in the formless. This is not to say it lacks a basis, but rather that it operates through a more distant kind of inference. Guo Tiantian chooses an abstract language yet never detaches from perceptual reality. Each of her creations is based on an index of perceptions—emotional experiences, tactile encounters, seen colours, heard sounds, and read histories all become her subject matter, while also serving as tangible supports that alternately lift her into artistic reverie.

I. Interweaving: Time, Space, Objecthood and Painting

There exist a constant coexistence and interaction between objecthood and the art of painting in Guo Tiantian's works. Tiantian's works reveal her contemplative engagement with the dimensionality of the artwork itself. Some of them adopt a boxes-like presence, such as *Pranayama* (2024), *Whisper of the Wind* (2025), *Into the Dream* (2025), others resemble books (e.g., *Silence is waves breaking against the boat's bow*, 2024-2025, *I Offer You These Poems*, 2025, *Weather Map*, 2025, *Correspondence*, 2024-2025). In her practice, each canvas adds an extra dimension, guiding the viewer's gaze toward a space that extends beyond its edge. In his book *Art and Space*, Martin Heidegger emphasizes that emplacing space is the essence of sculptures. For instance, Donald Judd's *Untitled (Stack)* (1967), with its serial cubes affixed to the wall, ostensibly demonstrates the principle. Instead of appreciating the work from a single, steady viewpoint, viewers are compelled to move around and apprehend its presence corporeally, which evokes the continuum of the space and unsettle the dominated visual element traditionally associated with painting. Returning to Tiantian's work, a parallel sculptural feature is not only superficially stay in the outward form of the work, but also subtly embedded within the work, reinforcing the extended space. The “truth of existence” has intervened in the very essence of “painting.”

Lacquer, the material, has been applied onto the surface of painting from over 8000 years ago, predating ink for 5000 years. Yet, due to its unique physical properties, lacquer historically served primarily for the making of vessels, where the polished sheen of such a sleek texture has been sealed on those artifacts, reinforcing the impression of elegance and solemnity for thousands of years. On her trajectory of working through contemporary art, rather than turning away from it, Guo Tiantian chose to confront and archaeologise the collection of endured norms of the material, and proposed a provocative question: “why do ancient artifacts already manifest qualities of contemporary aesthetics?” Her interrogation could presumably be derived from the pursuit of eternity, which generates the resonance and reflection between the ancient and the present. Such reflection also advocates her careful negotiation between “objecthood” and “painting”, “history” and “experiment” in her experimental practice with various materials. The scarlet in *The Speaking Bell* (2025) comes from the blending of lacquer and cinnabar, in which the artist interlaces fine coloured threads with brass dots, producing a visual rhythm whose gentle recitation and metallic resonance attune perception to the present. In *Pathbreaker (The Wall Becomes the Path)* (2024-2025) and *Letter* (2024), the traces of bodiless moulding and thread-like inscriptions remain as evidence, symbolizing the shared silence of

architectural memory and unwritten text. These works unfold in the perceptual interval between painting and object, where the object asserts its eternity and the painting rekindles the vivid will of life.

II. Defocusing: Wandering and Entering in Trance

If the artwork is what appears, art is what lingers—hidden within the seen. Guo Tiantian employs texture as a kind of grammatical marker, a means of narrating through materiality. In works like *Into the Dream* (2025) and *Shed Tears Crystallize into Diamonds* (2025), she builds layers of translucent, amber-like colour, producing a depth that evades immediate comprehension. Varied finishes—from matte to reflective—generate optical vibrations, a visual trance that draws the viewer into a state of defocused awareness.

Colour, in her hands, is both medium and metaphor. She is highly attuned to its behaviour under shifting light and perspective. Two distinct colour concepts operate in her work: the “luminous” and the “material.” Tiantian isolates and purifies them, using each for its particular energy—much as a poet uses words not for accumulation, but for essence.

Her “luminous” colours are intense and expansive, emphasizing relationality. Josef Albers taught that colour is never seen truly—only in relation to other colours (“Every perception of colour is an illusion... we do not see colours as they really are. In our perception, they influence each other”). Even in Tiantian’s near-monochromatic works, one senses a careful choreography of tonal interaction, a subtle resonance among pieces. Yet unlike Albers’s systematic experiments, her colour seems imbued with spirit—closer to Rothko’s fields of emotion. In *The Deep Blue is a Silent Chest* (2025), blue unfurls like breath: layered, translucent, and saturated with profound feeling.

Her “material” colours, by contrast, are grounded and specific—often incorporating metals like silver and gold. For example, *Stillness* (2025) and *Distant* (2025), both works included substances like silver, nickel and copper. These are not pigments but substances—their presence physical, their effect quiet yet persistent, just like sketches with exquisite texture and calm tone. Their fine granular surfaces invite close viewing; they do not shout but murmur. It is worth noting that some of these materials, like nickel and copper oxides, are mildly toxic—beauty here is not without risk. That edge of danger mirrors the artist’s own reflective intensity—a willingness to encase sharp insight in forms of delicate beauty. When these works share a space, they enter into dialogue, composing a silent conversation across the room. To stand among them is to drift between colour and material—to lose focus and find another kind of sensation.

III. Distancing: From Resonance to Iridescence

Music visualizes; painting resonates. The two arts have long been intertwined, each supplying what the other withholds and evolving to distinct styles from different artists. In Guo Tiantian’s work, musicality is a vital current. The exhibition *All fervor sublimates through restraint* includes three sections, in which the second section set in a blacked-out room, where experimental sound pieces drift from four directions. These are built from field recordings—metal chimes, a child’s hum, decontextualized poetry, string percussion, ancient village bells, conversations, ancient wind instruments from Song Dynasty, human chant—abstracted into a composition that leads the listener inward. The darkness serves as a kind of sensory purification, a narrowing of focus reminiscent of the passage into the “Peach Blossom Spring”, a utopia-like refuge. The sounds that arise are not melodic in the conventional sense; they are closer to conversation—or to inner speech. The artist underscores silence through sound, revealing them not as paradoxes but as mutual intensities.

Similarly, her paintings do not illustrate music; they invoke a state of listening turned inward. They are meditative spaces, attuned to the flow of time and awareness. The effect is like that of a triangle note in a symphony—penetrating layers of sound with singular clarity. In works like *A Short Score* (2023–2024), she uses notations and dot sequences like visual overtones—points of departure toward expanded consciousness. *Picking the Stars* (2025), for instance, unfolds on a warm ivory ground marked by wheat-coloured wrinkles that resemble both sound waves and ancient traces. Coral purple and ochre “strings” drift across the surface, while mother-of-pearl inlays and coloured dots hover like constellations. The composition is divided by two vertical bands of lilac and cyan—a subtle structure that implies an Eastern cosmology of

balance and openness. It is at once a farthest reach into the universe, and the closest arrival of the spirit.

She is not decorating with pattern but pointing toward meaning as in the idiom “pointing to the moon.” Her art is a spiritual orientation, guided by self-set intentions. As she notes, *Picking the Stars* (2025) and *Metaphysical Musings* (2025) are conceived as a pair—one white, one black, extremes achievable in lacquer. They gaze toward one another, embodying a convertible relation between object and thought. Does the star still exist? Has it long collapsed? Is thought something distant, or is it standing right before us? Thought is a real yet intangible expectation, one that turns away from the reality before us. If thought can be grasped, what of the stars? Such questions echo Zhuangzi’s meditation: “天之苍苍，其正色邪？（The blueness of the sky—is that its true colour？）”

In the deep jade-green *The Cool Descends* (2025) and the two works above, embedded shellfish fragments catch the light from certain angles—glowing or absorbing, shifting with the viewer’s position. These points act like apertures, piercing the picture plane while simultaneously securing its tonal unity. We do not notice the stars without the dark sky; we do not recognize the moon without the water that holds it. These almost imperceptible details captivate Tiantian—she invests them with time, attention, and care. Yet such fleeting effects risk dissolution. Her work requires a steady inner light, a composed clarity. Through delicate lineation and rhythmic structure, she diagrams a metaphysical consolation—a bridge between polyphonic music and silent contemplation, between the distant and the nearby.

IV. Touching: Feathering and Bearing the Presence

“All fervour sublimates in restraint.” But what is restrained, and what is transformed? In works like *All fervor sublimates through restraint* (2025), *Pranayama* (2024) and *The Fragrance of a Child’s Skin* (2025), the act of lines drawing becomes a repeated, almost ritualistic practice. It is in such minute gestures that art often reveals its deepest intentions. Line drawing—especially straight lines—is an exacting discipline. The brush must hold tension like a taut string—neither too stiff nor too slack. Pigment consistency is critical: too thin, and it spreads; too thick, and it resists flow. Drying conditions must be anticipated. What appears as a simple line is in fact the result of repeated placement—each stroke a deliberate release of viscous pigment.

For Tiantian, “this process is a form of meditation—a direct reflection of mind state. If the mind is unsettled, the line won’t be straight,” she says. Her daily life and studio practice feed into this cycle of creation and reflection. She transforms fleeting moments of absorption into sustained artistic inquiry, and in turn, the act of painting cultivates deeper attention. She channels seemingly fleeting sensations into disciplined gestures, anchoring transient experiences in considered action. With striking sincerity, the artist offers her private sustenance to the viewer. As she reflects: “I hope my paintings invite close looking—they wait openly, without pretence, offering an invitation. For those willing to spend time with them, a quiet intensity and emotional depth await.” This is not art as posture or performance, but as shared vulnerability. Its power lies in its accuracy—an accuracy born of heightened awareness, capable of conveying profound emotion and insight through abstraction.

Guo Tiantian is rebuilding the connections between reality, self, and art. Her work is deeply aesthetic and deeply intellectual. In the stubbornness of lacquer, she finds vitality—now luxurious, now austere; now rhythmic, now pure; now sublime, now fragmentary. The sublimation she seeks is not transcendence in the grand sense, but a heightened sensitivity to the barely perceptible. Everything—especially what seems insignificant or unsayable—becomes potential material. These are the overtones of her practice.

For an artist engaged with synaesthesia, touching is the most immediate way to measure space and the simplest, purest form of praise. Tiantian’s choice of colour, gloss, texture, and surface are refined through countless hours of polishing and revealing. She touches the paintings repeatedly, as if tending to skin—cleaning her hands, returning to the surface. This is not fastidiousness, but care. Like the accumulated fingerprints on a Giacometti sculpture, her works gather presence through touch. They convey not sterile perfection, but a resilient, solitary, self-consoling space. If we value only pristine surfaces, we end in coldness. What an artist can do for herself—what she can carry—remains a lifelong discipline.