

# SHERWIN TAN AND HIS BRUSHES WITH LIGHT— ART MAKING IN THE THRESHOLD OF EPIPHANY

BY DAVID JONATHAN Y. BAYOT

*One really beautiful wrist motion, that is synchronized with your head and heart, and you have it. It looks as if it were born in a minute.*

—Helen Frankenthaler

In the picture space of Chinese-Filipino painter Sherwin Tan, darkness and the persistent silence that resonates therein have the color of white...until “one really beautiful wrist motion” breaks with rapid brush-works the absence of form and force... and then, there’s light!

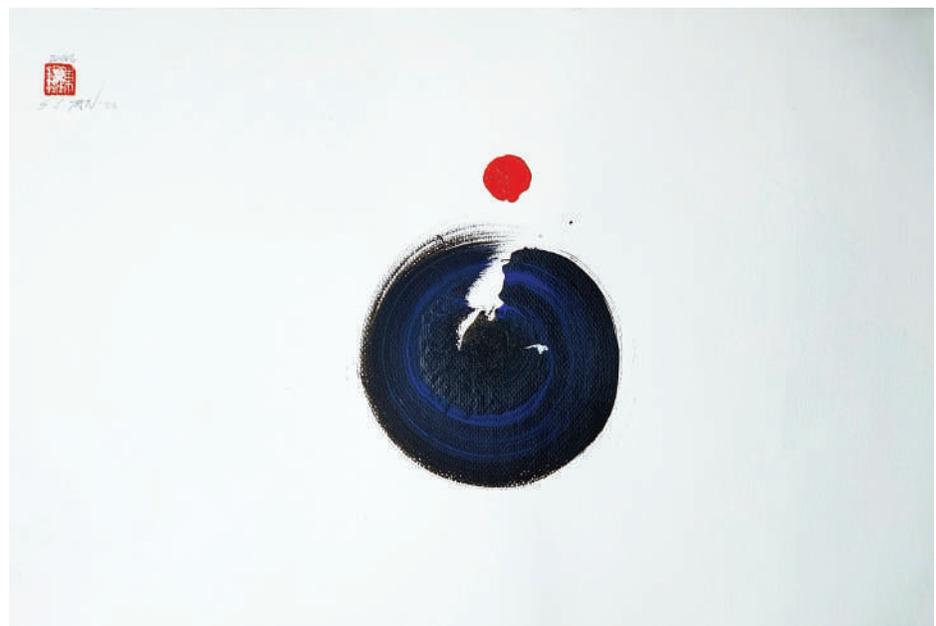
Tan loves to recount an interesting instance of his engagement with “darkness” when he was just around ten years old. He had a brush with death (so to speak) in the room housing the butterfly collection of his mother. There and then, he felt the impulse to give the lifeless butterflies the light of a second chance of living—this time, in the imagination, his and that of the onlookers of his sketches. He scrupulously drew with pencil the image of each of the butterflies in the boxes housing these beautiful Lepidoptera. Against the stifling of death, the residual life

of these beings—in their yet vibrant colors and patterns—spoke a language only a child, an artist could understand. And the young artist began capturing with great excitement the images of these creatures, each on a sheet of toilet tissue roll.

As the years progressed, Tan’s art-works on the fragile tissue paper deteriorated and finally, reached a point of extinction, as was the case of his subjects. But that unspeakable terror and wonder of an experience—that brush with Darkness and that same brush against Light—has over the years become an élan vital that has compelled the narrative journey of his figurations and abstractions in art.

And the story, specifically of Tan’s art education, formally began when he embarked on the fine arts program at the University of San Carlos in Cebu. There, he remembered

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that the artscape was very much defined by the influence of the realism/impressionism/luminism of Cebuano painter Martino Abelana, who is referred to in Philippine art chronicles as “the Dean of Cebuano Painters” as well as “the Amorsolo of the South.” And it’s in that artscape where Tan would paint as his mentors would wish him to, as he simultaneously began seeking a style of vision that he could one day call his own.

He eventually found what he could call his own in the mindscape of his ethnic Home. He began to go back in time to his elementary and high school days in a Chinese school when he and every student in that educational system had to undergo the “drudgery” of a scholastic subject that ironically possesses an elegant name—calligraphy. This traditional Chinese(-inspired) art of beautiful writing has been aptly described as a poem without speech, a dance without movement, a painting without figure, and a music without sound.

Tan realizes that it is in this particular mode of art making—wherein words, movements, figures, and sounds can come together for a “performance art”—that he would like to take the “western” artistic outlooks he has imbibed through the years to another plane of possibility and reality. It’s a plane he could describe in the words of Franz Kline: “I paint not the things I see but the feelings they arouse in me.”

Tan said he couldn’t agree more with Kline when the action painter par excellence said that “the final test of a painting, theirs, mine, any other, is: do the painter’s emotions come across?” And such co-incidence of artistic creed, Tan would go on to say, could explain why he finds Van Gogh’s paintings and the expressiveness of the dutchman’s art an inspiration. The vivid colors, the sweeping, undulating, and rhythmic brushstrokes, as well as the thick impasto—they all give Van Gogh’s

art an extraordinary and indelible emotive texture.

As an abstract expressionist of the action painting strain—Jackson Pollock being a notable representative—Franz Kline exemplifies in his art what William Wordsworth describes as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.” And the result: dynamic compositions with huge swathes of black paint brushing against the canvas in various directions, with brushstrokes that are evidently expressive as they are aggressive—works in black and “white” that resemble Oriental calligraphy and that, by their “customized” format, foreground their individuality as art and not as commodity.

On the discursive road via Franz Kline, Tan is however mindful to distinguish his artistic disposition from the action painting maestro. While Kline would time and again dissociate his work from Oriental calligraphic art—saying, for instance, that “the Oriental space is an infinite space; it is not painted space, and our is”—Tan takes pride in the defining influence of Chinese calligraphic art on his own creation. He said that while he admires how Kline’s work is able to retain an indelible residue of the highly physical process that has transpired during the creation of the art piece—it’s not however the swift, bold, and intense brushstrokes per se that captivated him.

(FROM TOP) “Into the Bright Future”, 2021, 24 x 55 inches, acrylic on canvas, David Jonathan Bayot Collection; “Solace”, 2020, 16.5 x 11 inches, acrylic on paper, David Jonathan Bayot Collection. (OPPOSITE PAGE) “Meditation”, 2020, 16.5 x 11 inches, acrylic on paper, David Jonathan Bayot Collection.



(FROM TOP) "Flow of Grace", 2021, 24 x 32 inches, acrylic on canvas, David Jonathan Bayot Collection; "Rays of Hope", 2021, 30 x 37 inches, acrylic on canvas, David Jonathan Bayot Collection.

At one point in his discussion of Kline, action painting, and Chinese calligraphy, Tan foregrounded the centrality of the Chinese notion of "*yibicheng*" in his art making. The term denotes the calligraphic execution of a Chinese word or character on paper (or other media) in one uninterrupted stroke that's prompted by a spontaneous impulse on the part of the artist.

Tan said that while the calligraphic rendition of a Chinese word entails only a singular stroke that appears like a spontaneous outburst without premeditation, the execution of that one stroke would demand, as a precondition, years of mindful, disciplined practice for the resulting word to assume that *character* of spontaneity, inevitability, and nonparaphrasable quality (so to speak). In other words, while the calligraphic production would seem like (or could be cursorily taken as) just "a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," one just can't afford to forget that for Wordsworth, that sort of spontaneity doesn't emerge out of nowhere; rather, it "takes its origin from emotions recollected in tranquility."

And the re-recollection of emotions until the latter attains a point that traverses analytic science to become a sensibility or a *habitus* (as the Scholastics would term it) takes time, patience, and discipline to yield results. To put it in yet another way: it takes mindful (which also means, nonmindful) patience for an artist to be able to say and do as Frankenthaler once claimed: "I had the landscape in my arms as I painted it. I had the landscape in my mind and shoulder and wrist."

While his calligraphic style of art making is evident in his "black-and-white" minimalist paintings (represented in this article by "Meditation" and "Solace"), Tan is very much of the conviction that the stylistic framing that gives form to his artistic representation, as well as the Chinese calligraphic philosophy that informs his artworks, are no less articulate in his abstract expressionist works (such as "Rays of Hope" and "Flow of Grace") as well as in his impressionist pieces (of which, "Into the Bright Future" is a good epitome).

Since 1996, when Tan held his first solo exhibition, his artistic creed has remained constant. Then, as it is now, he envisions his art to be a force of positivity in the inscape of his viewers. He considers it a most heartening event when spectators could feel his passionate brushes with Light while he engages the white expanse of nonmeaning on the canvas on his easel, as it is in life—his as well as the others'.



At this critical juncture of human history where the pandemic has left the human spirit immured in the labyrinth of ubiquitous darkness, Tan knows in his heart of hearts that art by itself may really be too feeble to fill the current void. But nevertheless, he keeps faith in his conviction that as long as the artist persists within his own custom-made picture space in this long march for meaning, albeit in a state of not-knowing or even unlearning—somewhere in his art, miniscule as these patches

may be, pockets of insight could be opened, and thresholds of epiphany be brought to light.

After all, in the candid words of Tan's kindred spirit, Franz Kline, "You paint the way you have to in order to give. That's life itself, and someone will look and say it is the product of knowing, but it has nothing to do with knowing, it has to do with giving."

Now, in the spirit and cadence of Gaston Bachelard's thought on reading...look back, look on, look again...always!

