

THE ART OF YANK WONG (1996)

David Clarke

The paintings of Yank Wong, examples of which were on show at Gallery 7 in Hong Kong during March 1995, can be characterized as having a layered feel. To build up several layers of paint is of course a commonplace way of working in acrylic, but my point is not so much one about technique as one about how the final image looks to the eye. The paint layers remain relatively distinct, thus creating a sense of depth through overlap, although the cues of depth are never allowed to add up to a coherent reading that would undermine a sense of the integrity of the two-dimensional design. An ambiguity of figure and ground is always introduced since the dominant colour in an image, the one which reads as the 'ground' because of its presence without significant modulation over a large area of the canvas surface (and often because of its relative 'neutrality' in comparison with the singing hues to which it is juxtaposed as well), has usually been added at what is clearly a late stage. Two examples of works in which the 'background' is a layer near the top in this way are *Rules (Un Tableau Carrement Rond)* (1994) and *Grey Still* (1994). In these two paintings, as in others by the artist, there are also subject matter hints which seem to want to encourage further our reading of the dominant colour as background. The first of these two works, for instance, might perhaps be interpreted as depicting a table with objects on it. The brown area (if we follow this reading) becomes the floor on which the table is standing, a plane further away in space but parallel to that of the table-top itself. In *Grey Still* the grey helps define the contours of objects, helps bring them into being, albeit that they then read as objects on top of a grey surface. Occasionally depicted objects attain a high degree of legibility (for instance an amphora-like form in the bottom left of *Point Final*, 1994), but generally Wong keeps the subject matter hints vague, so as to prevent too coherent an illusory space being established.

Although, as I've been trying to indicate, Wong does not allow us to fully stabilize our reading of the order in which the various layers of the image were added, it seems as if a largely spontaneous first stage of work is followed by the application of a later, more controlled layer. I don't want to overemphasize this two-stage property (which is found in a more extreme, clear-cut version in certain works by Miro), but despite the schematic nature of this characterization I think it can throw some light on the paintings. The earlier stage of working seems to involve wetter, more translucent paint applied in a free manner. A variety of sensuous colours appear, and a strongly lyrical feel is introduced. The later stage involves the application of a less fluid layer of paint, and opaque effects predominate. The colouristic diversity gives way at this point, and what I have earlier referred to as the 'dominant' or 'ground' colour appears. In the two works mentioned above there is only a single such colour, but in others, such as *Les 100 Pas de la 1000 Patte* (1994), there are two or more. Although a hot red (for instance) can be the dominant colour, in many works the role is played by a more mixed hue. In *Rules (Un Tableau Carrement Rond)* it is a brown, whilst in *Grey Still* it is a grey. A white has often been mixed in to qualify the colour, as in the case of the upper portion

of *Les 100 Pas de la 1000 Patte*. A greater sobriety is commonly a characteristic of this layer of the painting, and to some extent the more spontaneous earlier marks are canceled or edited. Those which remain visible are of course heightened by the contrast with the less exuberant latecomers, which show more concern for developing the overall compositional unity than the earlier colours had. By playing a mediating role, the later colour layer enables the more diverse earlier colour accents to coexist, and not merely clash with one another. Some more spontaneous marks even find a place for themselves on top of this layer, further serving to bind the surface together by preventing that layer from becoming too visually dominant.

© David Clarke 1996.

Excerpted from David Clarke, Art & Place: Essays on Art from a Hong Kong Perspective (Hong Kong University Press, 1996). Copyright Hong Kong University Press, used by permission. For more information on this book please visit the Hong Kong University Press web site at http://www.hkupress.org/asp/bookinfo.asp?PD_NUM=9622094155