

UNDER ERASURE METHOD AS A TOOL FOR VISUAL LANGUAGE IN CONTEXT OF THAI LANDSCAPE PAINTING

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ABSTRACT

Deforestation in Thailand results not only in the loss of a complex ecological system but also in a reduced visual aesthetic due to a less complex landscape, for example, the dense labyrinth of the forest compared with the open simplicity of an orchard. Increasingly forests are being replaced by vast plantations of a very limited number of plant species. These plantations also require intervention in order to sustain the cropping compared with the natural health of forest soils. The land was abstracted, the landscape became absence of the labyrinth of the forest, introduced instead orchards.

“Under Erasure” is a visual language that can be used for encoding visual messages. The author plans to use “Under Erasure” to create and compare his works with those of a handful of other Thai landscape painters. The paper will explore the processes and techniques used in this study.

KEYWORDS: *Under Erasure, Deforestation, Socio-Cultural, Metaphysics, and Capitalization.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Landscape paintings is a common genre in paintings in past and contemporary. In world art history, almost every culture whether in Asia or Europe, exhibit landscape mostly, in historical or narrative usage. Mostly portrayed the local geographical terrain and characters, botanical species and certain animals in regions. Most cave paintings are considered too early for landscape as we defined today, to be recorded. From Greek to Roman paintings were still using figure and ground with mostly empty negative space in the background. Not until the Renaissance period which paintings began to take shape of narrative with background to include more real elements. Most of the subjects were around religions. The skills of the craftsman were still only exhibit two dimensional qualities, somewhat flat with not much depth of space. Until Leonardo Da Vinci invented a technique call sfumato, a technique which blurred out the background so the space seem farther back, mimicking of how human’s eyes work when focus on the foreground then the background become blur. From this point on many movements after continued developing more skill of realistic paintings. This include John Constable, who was able to capture the greatness of nature vs human. (Figure 1.) A boy

sitting on top of a hill overlooking view of landscape with back toward the audience. This suggest the humanity of the subject (the boy) and us the audience of how small we are compare with nature



Fig 1. John Constable 1776-1837, Branch Hill Pond, Hampstead Heath, with a boy sitting on a bank circa 1825, oil on canvas

In modern art, a movement call the Impressionism was one of the pioneer to break of the realistic style with the stumble technique of painting. Some of the Impressionist artist work only in landscape and nature with minimal human as part of subject, such Monet. Some of Claude Monet’s works are; Haystacks, where he would paint the same painting but in four different time of year to reflect the light and mood of the landscape. (Figure 2) The Neo-Impressionism also pursued what their predecessors had begun. Eventually, once was merely elements to fill in composition to engage nature into the paintings, now Landscape became a genre of its’ own. The works just portrayed the character and mood of the various regions of geographical, seasons, time and space, plantations, sea, skies etc., some without humans.

Some landscape works are so minimal that the work became almost abstract or the representational are unrecognizable. As, Turner, attempted to capture the mood of the stormy sea. (Figure 3) Without the suggestion of the name, the painting is almost nonrepresentational. So if the painting became so abstract of such color field, due to his attempt to capture the greatness of nature. Again like his peer John Constable, comparing to human of how sublime we are to nature. However, this school of sublime was later overridden by the impressionist. [1]

In Turner's work, could this be the first abstract painting? A glance one could just recognize the painting as just color field, almost nonobjective. One has no way of knowing of where or what the painting is about.



Fig 2. Claude Monet, 1840-1926, Haystacks, End of summer, 1897, oil on canvas, 60x100 CM



Fig 3. Sea Storm, 1840-1845, J.M.W. Turner

So with the under erasure method can create a new set of visual vocabularies. Under Erasure originally translated from the word *Sous Rature*, German, a term developed by Martin Heidegger. A term when a writer crosses out a word but still leaves the word to be legible Under Erasure. Although, a literature's technique, many artists, designers have applied Under Erasure in visual field. However ironically, none have exhausted this technique. Throughout the history, the Under Erasure was rarely explored until recently. In the following chapters, how Under Erasure will contribute to new set of vocabularies will be discussed.

2. METHODOLOGY

Several years ago, a television station broadcasted, disaster of deforestation in eight provinces in Thailand (most likely there were more but these big eight were highlighted); Mae Hong Sorn, Prae, Chiang Mai, Nan, Tak, Sa Kaeo, Uttaradit and Petchabun. (Figure 4) However despite the Hugh disaster of the deforestation, this information did not make the national news. This

discussion will not go into political issue, but conversation was exchange between the researcher and several locals in few mentioned provinces to get raw information in tandem along with the broadcasted topic. The retrieved information from the locals all matched those of corn seeds were given out along with fertilizers and other materials. So, some of the enthused local people invested labor, after a few months' crop are ready for harvest. This cycle goes on until the mineral of the soil are exhaust then new cropped are moved on and expanded geographically. In a sense the more earth is use, the more profit is returned to those enthusiastic locals. The bourgeoisie invest and the proletariat are the ones who got their hand dirty, a classic capitalism case. Landscape of rural area in Thailand spread out in vast areas. Ranging from National Parks to small remoted villages, home to some of tribal people, (mainly recognized as the Karen and the Hmong). All were potential to be turn into resources and processed into agriculture commodities. The more the demand the more land were depleted. The majorities have learned this information via different channels of news, social Medias, etc. This phenomenon of exposor of information never allow the majorities to witness real space but rather consume though simulation and eventually in the minds of the citizen the simulation becomes reality. Baudrillard had coined this phenomenon, Hyperreal.



Fig 4. Map

Many contemporary artists which work in landscape genre, either work at the real site or from an image of the site. Since the information were introduced via mass media, the researcher decides to use this particular path as part of the process.

Images of landscape once captured onto cameras, the moment the shutter was pressed the image then transfer onto film or digital media, a birth of the simulation of an image. The reality had been replaced by signs and images, breeze of the wind, the sound of insects or the heat of the sun ceased to exist. The image then became a sign or symbol of the land of rural area of Thailand or central South East Asia. [2]

Map of each province were acquired from the World Wide Web and then later printed by the researcher. Images of the landscape of each province were also gained with the same method. The researcher's materials are mixed medium painting. Most of the paintings are done on canvas. The image of the territorial map is placed onto the canvas. Image of some of the landscape of the province were then studied and analyzed of proportion and compositions. Then rescaled to fit onto different size of canvases. Charcoal is the main medium to make marks as guidelines of the first draft of the work. Strings were place along the border of the territorial map. At this stage the first layer of composition is laid down. (Figure 5)

Encaustic paint is used to occupy of the second layer. Usually the encaustic's paint main ingredient is wax, so with this paint, thick texture is introduced onto the canvas. The third layer of the painting are mostly reflecting to the reference of the chosen image of each province from the internet. The visual reference is merely use only as a rough guideline. So, the color or the details are not focus for this layer. (Figure 6, 7, 8)

These three layers are the most crucial layer for this set of paintings. Any layers beyond these three are no longer formulated but rather calculated by the sense and personal taste of aesthetic instead. The amount of layers is not predetermined, but repeated until the researcher is satisfy. The colors of the finished layers do not reflect the reference; (Green Mountain does not have to be green but decided by the other colors it's juxtaposed). (Figure 9)



Fig 5. Process 1



Fig 6. Process 2



Fig 7. Process 3



Fig 8. Process 4

The work is nonrepresentational, composed through forms and lines with color field, but convey the information of the provinces. Usually if the artist do not name the work as an implication, there is a slim chance that the audience would be able to guess of the content. The collage of the map and the string which outline the territorial map of the province are already strong symbols for the audience to decode. The image of the landscape that was retrieved from the World Wide Web, became part of the hyperreal circle. According to Baudrillard; [3]

“Abstraction today is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real

without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory - precession of simulacra - it is the map that engenders the territory and if we were to revive the fable today, it would be the territory whose shreds are slowly rotting across the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges subsist here and there, in the deserts which are no longer those of the Empire, but our own. The desert of the real itself."

The land, in reality are no longer appear dazzle with richness of rainforest but rather deserted and abstracted by the hands of the people who were exploited.



Fig 9. Finished work.

In contrary, the method for Thai painters are much more conservative and value the old method of working. Some traditional visual language is still used. Most artist work from photograph in their studio, some works from imagination but still hold realistic references. The outcome of the mental image is still in representational language. The styles which each artist have chosen, are possesses with traditional aesthetics. Ranging from Pre-Raphaelite, Romanticism, Realism, Impressionism or some almost Abstract of color filed. Some of these illustration of these Thai landscape artist utilized mentioned style of works. The aesthetics are there, needless to say. However, these visual vocabularies have been repeated, some for over a century. Some of the art work act as an image of a representational imagery, which were taken from, frozen, or the time and the art work became objects which links mental image of the viewer into a hyperreal of the territorial space.

Majorities of the works are oil on canvas. One of the piece of landscape view on top of the higher ground. The execution of depth of field and the use of foreground, midground and background with very harmonious hues were applied. Nice detail of the white flower of the foreground just shout in the face of the viewer. The sky's color and the style of

the Pre-Raphaelite realism are nicely utilized. (Figure 10)

Another landscape painting is set up at a ground level point of view. Palette of purple, and yellow dominated the space, with secondary use of blue, green and burnt sienna. A strong perspective of the yellow plantation is set up in foreground with huge purple with light intensity occupied the background with little of cloudy blue sky fighting for its existence. However, the main focus of this painting are the haystacks engaging with the viewer eyes almost center of the painting. (Figure 11) A more progressive landscape painting, also set the point of view at the human eyes level. A gloomy mood of the work which divided the canvas into almost top and bottom half. A dark sky with field of grass, almost suggest a stormy and windy day. Touches of viridian green among the grass and permanent light green in the sky are nice usage of colors. (Figure 12)



Fig 10. Issared Wongsing, อิศเรศ วงศ์สิงห์, จิตนาการแห่งธรรมชาติ oil on canvas

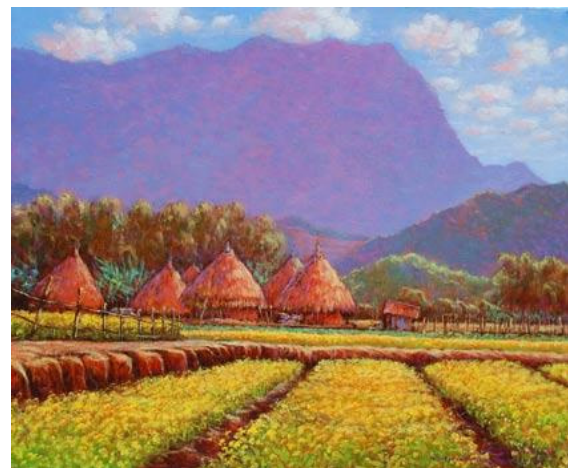


Fig 11. Aphirak Punmoonsilp, อภิรักษ์ ปันมูลศิลป์, oil on canvas

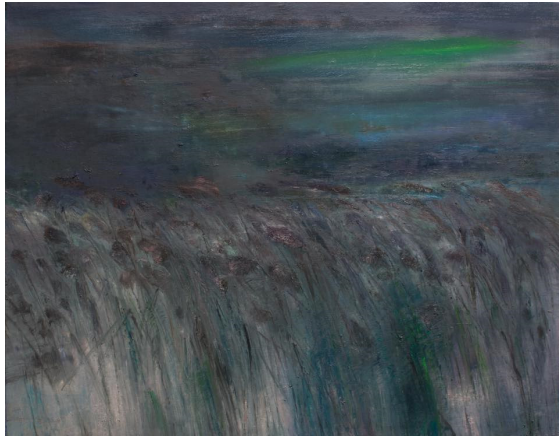


Fig 12. Jakkrit Karaket, จักรกฤชณ์ การะเทศ oil on canvas

3. DISSUCSSION

A beginning of the rebellious movement against representational or academic works, the impressionists. Artists such Claude Monet and his stumble technique or George Seurat with his pointillism or Vincent Van Gogh utilized many innovative strokes of paint brush. However, many agreed that the nonrepresentational paintings pioneers were Turner. (Figure 13) In 1819 Turner had painted a color studied for one of his sea painting. This painting was ahead of its time, an avant-garde piece. The minimal of the shape and form reduced into several horizontal stripes, depicting horizon line where the sky meet the sea and earth on the foreground. A whole different set of lexicon that no one dare to use.

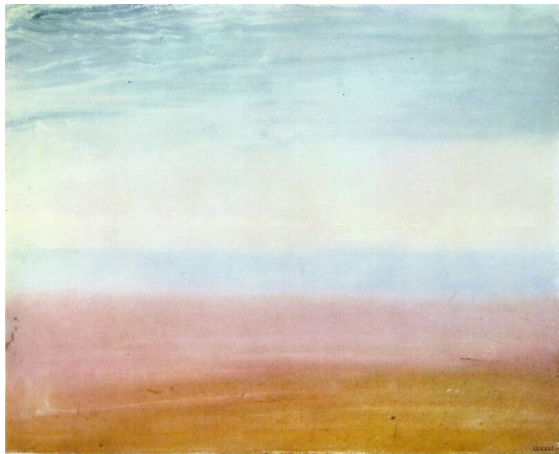


Fig 13. Color Studied, 1819, J.M.W. Turner

We all perceived the world by gaze. The traditional or representational vocabularies, are fixed at each frame, a gaze and perspective. However, if one gaze without a fixed vanishing point, shape and forms are broken from the traditional lexicon. This Phenomenology of Perception can be explained by Merleau-Ponty as following:

“A gaze at infinity, allow to see the structure of the visual world, in which not all objects are attended to at one time from one point of view; instead our perceived world is structured by a plurality of overlapping perspective within which different aspects are somehow seen together, as aspects of just one world.” [4]

In today visual vocabularies are in different set, one of artist Sean Scully, portrait city scape in similar vocabularies as Turner. The horizontal stripes possessed closed lexicon of the modern visual. Both have abandon the representational language. By abandon the perspectives and focus point, seeing the world through a squeezed eye, rid of all the details. The visual will appear similar to Turner’s color studied or those of Sean Scully.

In case of Thai painter, Apirak’s painting (Figure 11) adopted the impressionist technique but the perspectives remain obvious. At the moment of one’s eye focus on a spot it quickly moves on to the next, while simultaneously access to the mind to link to memories and those images later become one’s mental image stored away in their minds. The external image transcendence of the representative then transfers the external spatiality and all the sensible qualities into the metaphysical space of the audience. [5]

The researchers approach is more peculiar, the use of strings as part of method are not widely adopted. Under Erasure technique along with Signified and Signifier open up a trail to explore. As Signified and Signifier can be trace down along strings of signifiers. The territorial map signified the location. The word string of the signified and the signifier can be alternately read as physical string. The string which form a shape of territorial map of the selected province can be decode in unorthodox method. Also with territorial map can be a hidden clue for the audience to seek out parallax view. The absence of the details and the absence of the perspective of the image but presenting a presence of the truth of the situation of the absence of the forest which have turn into orchard of economic plants. The loss of the forest’s impact is a gigantic loss of the ecological system of Thailand. In a sense the forest is being erase and replaced, that is the researcher’s approach of the Under Erasure as the main tool.



Fig 14. Land Line Black and Blue, 2014, oil on aluminum, Sean Scully

4. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion of how we gaze which are part of still images. The mental image or the transcendence image with the hyperreal contexts fused imaginary into the metaphysical realm. The metaphysical space that the audience experience when looking at the painting are the core of the message or the pure truth. This process use memory trace to enter the metaphysical space of the mind to gain information, and then later investigate. The truth that can be trace from the visual language that can be decode in to the message. This process cannot be successful if the Here Trace (physical trace) and Their Trace (metaphysical trace) are not presence. The image of landscape is absence into abstract but through this process reveal to those who investigate closer to the mental strings of clues. Referring to Derrida, [6]

“Only pure absence-not the absence of this or that but absence of everything in which all presence is announce”

The absence of the images reveals the presence or according to Derrida is the “pure truth”.

The paintings which have been encode and fasten with cypher. The geographical map reflected the territorial and the absence of images of forest but left with Here Trace are for the audience to decode and seek out the truth, the Pure Presence. The deforestation that affects all of us in one way or another of our daily lives. Some might not be aware of this ripple but raising a voice of this issue to pairs of unheard and unseen eyes and ears are the

messages along with the visual tools of Under Erasure that is much different from the Thai landscape painters.

GLOSSARY

Here-trace

A physical trace for example in this research; a trace of paint that adhere on the canvas.

Pure presence

Pure presence is a state of present that reveal both physical present, and metaphysical present.

There-trace

A trace that related to a sense of one’s thoughts or experiences, a metaphysical trace.

Trace

A mark of the absence of a presence, an always-already absent present, the originally lack that is related to thoughts or experience.

Transcendence Image

Image in the real world before being recognize and memorized into mental image.

Mental Image

Images which are implant by what we see then by memory created in our mind, some the memories of the mental images are not identical to the real image but fabricated in our mind.

Under erasure (Sous rature)

Under erasure does not absent the meaning of the word or a lost presence, but an aim to prevail the impossibility of presence altogether, an attempt to return the absent meaning to the present, a “pure presence”. A presence that is not ready-to-hand but a presence at a present-at-hand, a metaphysical realm of presence.

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