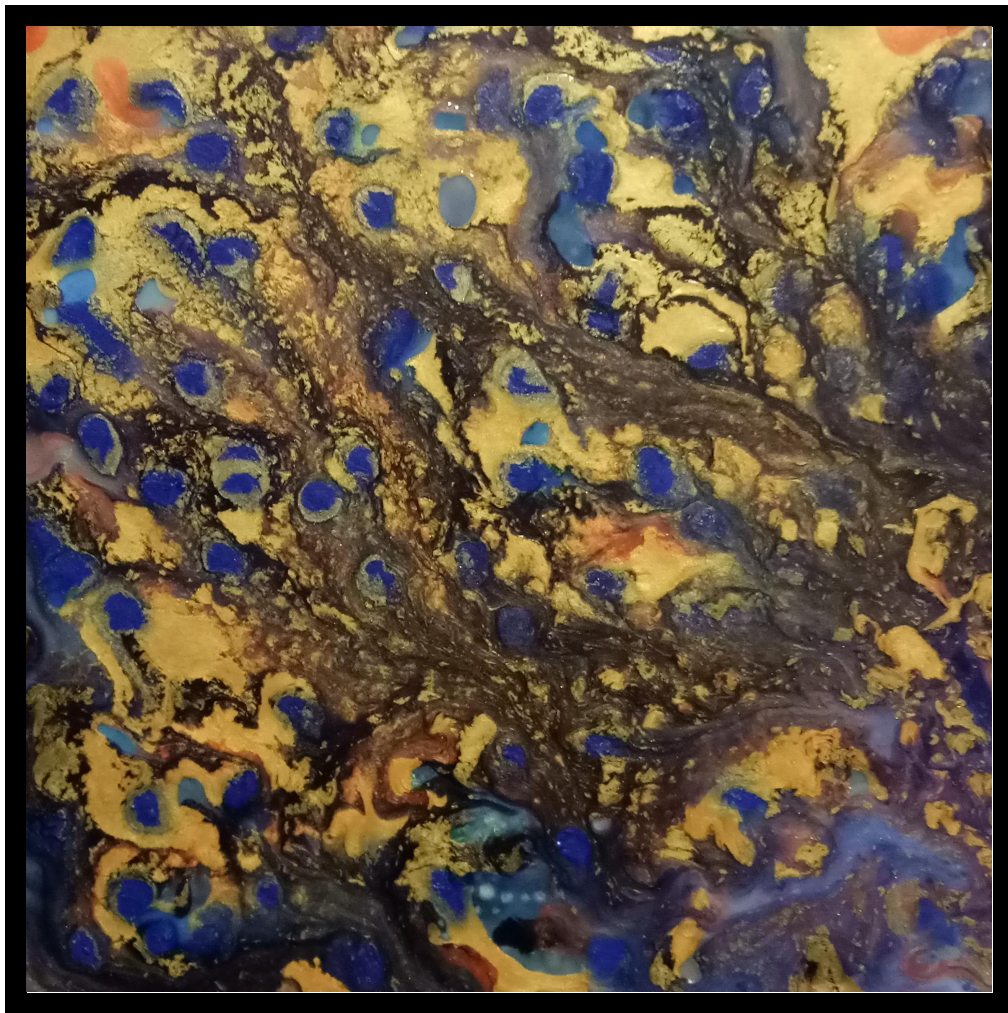


Strange Forms

Transcendence through Art



Chan Chih Min

It is said that art imitates life.

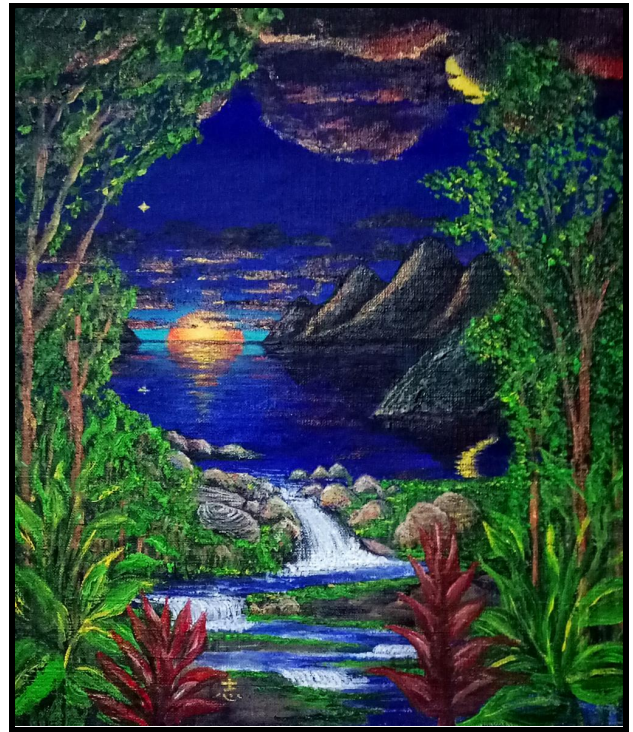
From my own experience, the reverse might hold more truth. We live in an imperfect world. Life, as we know it, is but a pale reflection of a Platonic ideal (in which perfection of form is in harmony with the elements, and creation is present in every aspect of existence).

In the seeming absence of such perfection, we must turn to alternate ways of seeing and perceiving. One such way is provided by the imaginative process of artistic creation.

Through art, and imagination, we are able to visualise forms that, by their very existence, provide tangible evidence of beauty and transcendence. For it is art that enables us to forge the "stuff to vie strange forms with fancy", and experience "a World in a Grain of Sand".

In my art, I literally take grains of sand that have been crushed and pulverised into powder to create worlds that reflect the possibility of transcendence through art. I take crushed lazurite (from lapis lazuli), powdered turquoise, micronised shungite, and so on, mix them in water and acrylic polymer substrates to make paint. Then I layer them on canvas, or linen, or wood, or aluminium panels, creating unique colours and textures, before sealing them for further treatment, gilding with gold leaf, or inlaying with gemstones, prior to varnishing.

The result is often quite astonishing: unpredictable at times, like life, sometimes frustratingly elusive, but ultimately very rewarding.



Perfectly Strange Forms

*Nature wants stuff
To vie strange forms with fancy...*

Cleopatra in Shakespeare's
Antony and Cleopatra

Nature lacks the substance to match the ideals of the imagination.

In other words, reality is imperfect.

Take for example a perfect cube: we know what it is supposed to look like and can express its form mathematically. But can we actually find perfect examples of cubes in nature?

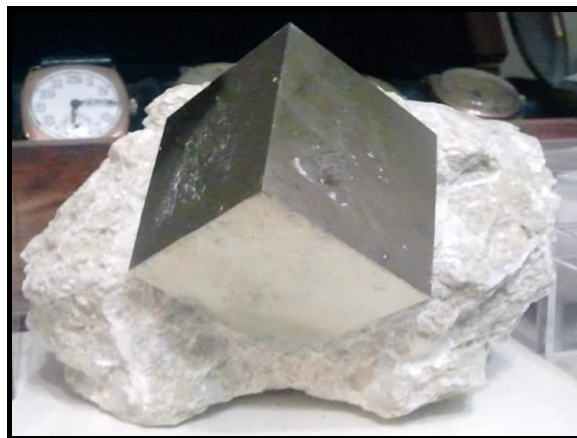
Well, perhaps.

This extra large pyrite crystal (in matrix), from Navajún, La Rioja, Spain, displays what seems to be a perfect cubic form:

But, is it?

It looks like a cube, although precise measurements would probably reveal that it is not 100% perfect.

Nevertheless, its internal crystal structure is based on an ideal cubic system and this is reflected in its outward form.



So, on this basis, there is indeed perfection even though its physical manifestation may not be ideal; within what might seem to be an imperfect form is a world of perfect symmetry and harmony based on the laws of physics.

Plato's Theory of Forms posits that what we see in the real world is but a mere shadow of an ideal Form: perfection does not exist in nature, as Cleopatra so pithily points out in the quote above.

The world within is an ideal world. It is a Platonic ideal of perfect Forms.

The world within is an ideal world...



Worlds Within (Michael's Super Seven), 2018

When I use pigments made from natural gemstones to paint a gemstone, several things are happening simultaneously:

One

I'm painting nature (a gemstone) with nature (pigments made from natural gemstones).

Two

I'm making a copy (a painting) of a copy (a gemstone) of an ideal Form (*) using copies (pigments made from gemstones) of ideal Forms (**).

Three

The image we see (transmitted light from the painting) is but a mere shadow of the painting itself, which, in turn, is a shadow of what the painting actually represents (the gemstone), and the gemstone being represented is but a shadow of the ideal gemstone.

Four

I'm using imperfect forms to depict perfect Forms.



* The ideal Form could be many things: the concept of a painting (that which makes a painting, a painting), the perfect gemstone, or the perfect depiction of a gemstone.

** Here, the ideal Form could be the perfect colour or colouring agent, or simply the concept of pigments and the gemstones from which they are made.

Using imperfect forms to depict perfect Forms...



In *Sun Over Uluru*, 2017 (based on the photo of the Yowah nut opal on p. 4), I use pigments derived from iron oxides to paint the ironstone matrix; the artificial reconstitution of nature, using materials derived from nature, in a way blurs the line between art and reality, and by extension, between imagination and actuality.

In a strange twist, it turns out that imagination enables a glimpse of the Platonic ideal by striving to reach perfection. I am not saying that art is perfect (not mine anyway). But art opens the doors to imagination.

And imagination enables transcendence.

Before I elaborate, let us revisit Cleopatra's words. It is not without irony when she bemoans the lack of perfection in the real world. Her Antony is dead. Yet, in her mind, he will always be larger-than-life: he whose "legs bestrid the oceans", and whose "reared arm/ Crested the world..." is, in Cleopatra's imagination, transcendent of this mortal physical world.

The irony is that nature did actually create Antony.

The very same Antony that Cleopatra eulogises. But it is her "fancy", her imagination, that elevates him to an idealised Form: a Form that transcends the physical limitations of nature.

In *Andrea del Sarto*, Browning writes:

*Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,
Or what's a heaven for?*

It is once again suggested that human "fancy" (imagination) is what enables us to transcend our limitations; heaven represents the perfection we strive for, the perfection that eludes us in this physical world.

And that is how imagination, through art, enables transcendence.

Art, or specifically painting in this instance, provides a way to visualise, in a very literal sense, the ideal Forms of the imagination. To me, this is the noblest purpose of art, for it goes above individual human agendas, political or otherwise, and seeks to elevate us beyond the limitations of space and time.

Mana, 2016 (p. 7), represents an attempt to reconcile Heaven and Earth, the spiritual and the natural, imagination and reality, Form and shadow. Through the use of the lightning storm (gold) - an awe-inspiring natural phenomenon - to link the spiritual (lapis lazuli) with the earthly (terre verte, ochre), we are able to experience the Divine on Earth.

Whether or not the painting is able to achieve this is a different matter altogether. What it does do is freeze the moment (in time and space, quite literally, on a two-dimensional canvas surface), the imaginative act of striving to reach beyond our grasp.

An attempt to... experience the Divine on Earth...



Of course, each individual, from artist to audience responds to a piece of art differently. A painting on its own does not really exist meaningfully independent of an observer-participant. What the painting represents as a concept - its paintingness - exists outside of time as an ideal Form. But to me, it is quite meaningless without a participant. That is not to say that it has no meaning if no one is looking at it *now*. Meaning is independent of time. But the *experience* of meaning is bound by time. After which it becomes memory.

And memory becomes memory of other memories; like shadows of the ideal Form, each copy gets further and further removed from the original ideal.

Despite that, I believe that the power of memory to shape imagination does not diminish with time, regardless of how far removed it gets from the original experience. (Details of the memory may fade with time, but its effect on the imagination does not. In fact, it could even grow stronger over time; such is the power of imagination.)

Which is how, art, through its ability to involve its observer in a personal experience, can create imagination-shaping memories transcendent of time.



Above (right) is a printed image from a photograph of a painting: *Quartz*, 2017, done in a hyperrealist manner. The painting, in turn, is based on a photograph of a crystal (left), which in turn, is a "copy" of the crystal Form. So, the print in this book is quite far removed indeed from the idealised Form that it depicts.

And this is not even counting the reader, who merely sees the reflected light from the transmitted image of the printed page.

Without the observer, it might seem that there can be no meaning; however, as pointed out earlier, meaning exists independent of time, or perhaps it would be better to say that the *potential* for meaning transcends time.

The world is full of potential. A potential is simply something that is yet to be realised. At least not yet in this timeline.

When we engage with art, for example, by looking at a painting (or a transmitted image of a painting), and allowing our imagination to guide our responses, we are able to bypass all the copies that come between us and the ideal Form it depicts.

This is because imagination serves as a bridge that enables us to transcend space and time. It gives meaning to our experiences, and to the memories (as well as the memories of memories) of them.

Art and imagination are intricately related. They can bring us closer to ideals of perfection by bridging the gap between nature and Platonic Form, enrich our experiences with timeless memories, and fill our lives with transcendent meaning.

Nature inspires imagination...



Pigments of Imagination, 2016

The title of the painting above sums it up: my art is made from pigments - much of it is derived from nature, but also from human creativity. Yes, synthesis of man-made objects arises from our desire to create the "stuff" that nature "wants" (lacks); although, in many cases, it just stems from our need to create more of what we want.

The irony in our need to create what nature does not provide (enough of) is perhaps reflected best in the way excessive consumption (via consumerism) has led to the depletion of natural resources. However, in an age of synthetics, many have started to turn back to nature: not just for inspiration, but also because we have begun to realise that it is through nature that we are able to intimate the ideal Forms of perfection.

For nature inspires imagination.

Therein lies the paradox: nature may lack the "stuff" to "vie strange forms with fancy"; however, it is nature that inspires the imaginative artistic endeavours that enable us to transcend our physical limitations.

For within the seeming imperfections of nature lie the blueprints of ideal Forms: from perfect crystal structures to the laws of physics that govern the universe. These may manifest themselves imperfectly in the world we are able to perceive, but often, they are enough to inspire our "reach (to) exceed (our) grasp", and thereby get a glimpse of heaven...

And the rich, variegated, and beautiful worlds within.

*It is through nature that we are able to
intimate the ideal Forms of perfection...*



Blossoming, 2020

*The imaginative artistic endeavours that
enable us to transcend our limitations...*



Genius Loci, 2016

The rich, variegated, and beautiful worlds within...



A New Creation II, 2019

Paintings Illustrated

COVER

Peacock Dreams, 2018,

lapis lazuli, amethyst, botanical indigo, mayan blue, and optically variable pigments in acrylic with gold leaf on wood,
30 x 30 cm

PAGE 1

Morning on the Seventh Day, 2019,

lapis lazuli, International Klein Blue, PB 28, botanical indigo, amethyst, diopside, titanium dioxide, phosphorescent paint, and shungite in acrylic on linen,
40 x 35 cm

(A painting from my "Creation" series)

PAGE 3

Worlds Within

(Michael's Super Seven), 2018,

shungite, amethyst, Australian ochre, titanium oxide, Indian yellow, rhodonite, Sleeping Beauty turquoise, crushed natural diamond crystals, phosphorescent paint, botanical indigo, 12K gold leaf, with acrylic on hand-made Khadi cotton rag (640 gsm),
42 x 30 cm

Commissioned by a friend, this depicts a super seven crystal: a crystal that contains seven minerals (quartz, amethyst, smoky quartz, rutile, cacoxenite, lepidocrocite, and goethite).

Every element present in the inclusions of a super seven is represented:

Silicon, Oxygen, Hydrogen, Iron, Titanium, Aluminium, Phosphate, plus a few extras: Gold, Carbon

The background is painted with ancient earth minerals. The black is Shungite, a mineraloid containing over 98% carbon, from a deposit that is over 2 billion years old in Karelia, Russia. This background is like a form of negative space which purifies the energy around the crystal. The brown is a mixture of Shungite and Australian ochre, derived from weathered haematite (iron oxide) that is over 3 billion years old. It provides a grounding base to stabilize the crystal, enabling the observer to focus on what is important.

The crystal is pure energy. Comprised of very precious natural materials, it is virtually composed from the very elements it depicts.

PAGE 5

Sun Over Uluru (Yowah Nut Boulder Opal), 2017,
lapis lazuli, Sleeping Beauty turquoise, and micaceous pigments with acrylic on
Meirat 1000 gsm linen-based paper,
25 x 35 cm

PAGE 7

Mana, 2016,
mixed media (Australian ochre, Italian terre verte, genuine lapis lazuli, 23.5K gold
leaf, golden mica, and acrylic) on canvas,
50 x 50 cm

Mana is a concept in Austronesian languages that relates to the supernatural or spiritual forces that permeate the universe. Exact meanings vary regionally across cultures.

In a way, it is a link that connects the physical and spiritual forces of nature with the human experience of place and how this affects our cultural landscape.

Mana, present in the lightning storm (gold), represents not just the power of nature and its ability to arouse awe; it also symbolically links the spiritual (lapis lazuli) with the natural (terre verte, ochre). It is how we experience the Divine on earth.

Note: it was very difficult to photograph this painting as it has a textured relief and layers of gold that shimmer from different angles.

PAGE 8

Quartz,
fully terminated crystals intertwined in the shape of a cross,
with measuring tape and agate slice, 2017,
lapis lazuli and shungite with acrylic on Meirat 600 gsm linen-based paper,
35 x 25 cm

PAGE 9

Pigments of Imagination, 2016,
lapis lazuli and weird synthetic pigments with acrylic on canvas, 40 x 40 cm

PAGE 10

Blossoming, 2020,

gold leaf (16K) with lapis lazuli, rhodonite, amazonite, turquoise, and micaceous pigments in acrylic, on goatskin vellum,
25 x 20 cm

This painting incorporates influences from Medieval illuminated manuscripts, Orthodox Christian iconography, and Oriental ink art.

The material and colours used are deliberately symbolic.

The support, or painted surface, is genuine goatskin vellum. I wanted a natural surface that is durable and long-lasting. Something that transcends time. Vellum is the ideal choice. Used in most ancient manuscripts, they can last millennia. In my case, I was also interested in the natural texture and colour of the surface.

The painting depicts a girl reading under a flowering plum tree. The subject is not meant to be representational but is a metaphor for a girl blossoming into a beautiful woman. She is doing what she loves, set against a backdrop of the natural environment that she loves. The blossoming plum tree, covered in red flowers, alludes to her name.

She is dressed simply in a blue blouse, coloured with lapis lazuli pigment, with shimmering micaceous flakes, and shades of International Klein Blue, and PB28 (pigment colour).

Sitting on the grass against the plum tree, she is contemplating a book before her. The grass is coloured with amazonite pigment, a natural semi-precious gem mineral. A touch of turquoise pigment is added for texture. And more micaceous pigments to give it an iridescent sheen.

Behind her, and the tree, is the partial orb of a rising sun, in 16K gold leaf. Once again, the rising sun symbolises the ascent of life and a bright future, hope, and limitless possibilities.

The flowering plum tree reiterates all this, of course, and its symbolism needs little explanation. It is covered with pearlescent dots, like shimmering stars in the sky, of micaceous pigments. The flowers are coloured primarily with rhodonite pigment, a vibrant semi-precious gem mineral, mixed with micaceous pigments.

PAGE 13

Genius Loci, 2016,
acrylic on canvas,
50 x 50 cm

Genius Loci is one of a series of paintings themed "Ancestral Journeys".

It depicts the metaphysical aspects of the variegated landscapes encountered over many generations of migration and the continuous reconstruction of the notion of home: the spiritual and emotional place of belonging, where our lives are constantly renewed and nurtured against the backdrop of an ever-changing world.

PAGE 14

A New Creation II, 2019,
phosphorescent pigments, Australian ochre, shungite, bronze, and acrylic on
linen,
50 x 50 cm