

Art in America

October 2005

Richard Tsao at Chambers

Of Chinese parentage and raised in Thailand, Richard Tsao moved to New York in the early 1970s as an aspiring adolescent artist and has been exhibiting in Italy, New York and, more recently, Thailand for over 15 years. For this show he deployed what has become a signature series of small, contemplative paintings saturated with intense color. With their relative isolation and dramatic lighting, the paintings

exemplify a tradition of abstraction sufficiently meditative for a devotional reading, like *Stations of the Cross*. Tsao called this exhibition "Flood," a reference to the vivid pools of paint in his Brooklyn studio or, conceivably, to the seasonal flooding that he experienced as a child in Southeast Asia.

The surfaces of Tsao's paintings are rich with water-based pigment, their skins variously eroded and elsewhere built up with marble dust and the matte medium he uses as a binder. As the medium extends the integrity of the pigment, he manipulates it to achieve substrata and surfaces that range from a glazed appearance or deepening craquelure to the look of pollen, each seductive in its own right. The nearly square *Red Desert* (13 by 14 inches; 2004) resembles a glazed ceramic tile, its gleaming crimson surface slightly inflected with studio debris; both palette and title invite reference to Antonioni's first film in color. While the piece is relatively low in relief, small passages of dried medium expand beyond the painting's edge. Tsao also explores red pigment in the 29-by-27-inch *Mooncake* (2001), its surface pitted and scored like some lunar plain. A painting of the same size and year, *Moonlight*, is infested with fissures, the surface modulating from silvery rose to blue; it suggests topography in an infrared aerial view.

Tsao introduces a matte, almost powdery finish to the surface of the 12-by-36-inch *Blue Sea* (2001); one of several paintings exhibiting a distinct margin of an earlier layer of medium. Like *Yellow Sea* of the same year, it is landscape-oriented. Tsao does not evade imagery altogether. Here he included the opalescent *North Sea* (2001), a veil of modulated white covering a field of rose, its surface elaborated with the floral traces of lace laid down, pressed in, and removed from living paint, a repetitive gesture that seems appropriate to the devotional aspect of his work.

—Edward Leffingwell

Richard Tsao: *Mooncake*, 2001, water-based mixed mediums, 29 by 27 inches; at Chambers.

