

Tia-Thuy Nguyen

Sparkle in the Vastness

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'Sparkle in the Vastness', [Tia-Thuy Nguyen](#)'s first show with Almine Rech presents a suite of more than twenty multi-media paintings from the artist's ongoing series "I, my, me, cloud" (2018–). Impressed at an early age by her father's experience as a pilot in the Vietnam Air Force during the war (1955–1975), the artist has developed a deeply nuanced appreciation of clouds – what they can reveal and resemble, but also what they might hide. Enchanted by her father's majestic descriptions of flying through clouds in his plane, Tia was also frightened by his cautionary tales of clouds providing cover for enemy planes.

Capturing this dichotomy, Tia's paintings evoke a wide range of moods - from joy and hope, to gloominess and anxiety. Embellished with beads and embroidery, the glittery, shimmery works reflect the complexity, mystery and mutability of Tia's chosen subject matter. Representing an homage to her father - who passed away in 2022, and whose presence the artist has since experienced as a light radiating from inside herself - Tia's recent works evoke historical associations of light and spirituality, from sun streaming through stained-glass windows in a cathedral to Mark Rothko's radiant abstractions.

As the series' title suggests, "I, my, me, cloud" explores the subjective and ephemeral nature of celestial accumulations of moisture. Moisture, however, is only part of the equation when it comes to how we experience clouds. Light also plays a key role and is therefore a major subject for the artist. Rooted in the Quantum Theory of Light^[1], Tia's paintings conjure photons (the minute particles that make up light itself) via tiny glass beads, each of which reflects light differently to give the impression of an oscillating surface. With a nod to the French Impressionists, who conceived a new style of painting based on their desire to capture the effects of light on landscape, Tia has found a mixed-media technique that brings painting beyond mimesis or expression and towards experience. Expanding upon the disparate daubs of paint that Claude Monet, Berthe Morisot and Camille Pissarro used to conjure fleeting effects of sun, shadow and atmosphere on water and land, Tia uses thousands of beads and yards of colorful wool, jute, and bamboo yarns to create dazzling live interplays of light and shadow across the surfaces of her paintings.

In some cases, as in the work *Flying to Eternity*, the entire composition has been bedazzled with thousands of beads sourced from India, Prague, China, Poland, Vietnam and Japan. Reflecting the light differently according to ambient conditions of in gallery as well as the precise perspective of the viewer, the surface of the painting appears to be in constant flux. Building on what the Impressionists sought to evoke using paint alone, Tia's mixed-media creates compositions that are actually and forever changing - sometimes subtly, sometimes dramatically - according to their surroundings. Like a never-ending game of tag, light bounces around the surface and changes the composition again and again. It is impossible to experience one of these paintings the same way twice.

In other works, like *The Lap of Sunrise*, Tia has also embroidered onto the canvas, adding layers of warmth and softness over the original painted image. Though the embroidery does not glint or sparkle like the beading, these stratified surfaces court shadows and highlights in ways that suggest depth and density. Tia's fluffy swirls and curls of vibrant shades of red, pink, orange and yellow also recall the psychedelic patterns associated with Emilio Pucci prints. The link to couture is apt, as Tia is also a fashion designer and has long incorporated traditional beading and embroidery techniques into her designs.

Tia's color palette, which is not based on her observations of natures, sets her apart from the Impressionists and provides a connection even further back into art history. The bold, bright, wholly unexpected colors that characterize her cloud paintings are inspired by traditional Vietnamese folk arts, particularly the technique of Hàng Trống, which dates back to the sixteenth century. A mixed-media process, Hàng Trống begins with a woodblock print that provides a template for the main compositional elements of the final painting. Each print is hand-painted with bright colors and slightly varied details. The fact that Hàng Trống paintings can be considered both serial and unique is something Tia explores further in her own work. Depicting the same subject matter over and over, Tia insists on the one-of-a-kind status of each cloud (and each artwork.)

For Tia, clouds are like a blank canvas onto which elements like color, form and materiality are not intrinsic, but imposed. What we see as clouds are really the results of multiple external factors such as light, wind and moisture levels, all of which are constantly in flux. When Tia adds paint, beading and embroidery to canvas, she imposes an image on the canvas. However, by design, each of Tia's cloud paintings will be seen and interpreted differently. More so than clouds themselves, the main subject of Tia's paintings is subjectivity itself.

-- Mara Hoberman, curator and writer

[1] Proposed by Albert Einstein in 1921, the Quantum Theory of Light states that light travels in bundles of energy, each bundle known as a photon.