



Main Space

Living Palette

Curated by GAS Collective

Sept 13 - Nov 9, 2024

Curatorial Notes

Living Palette takes primary colours *red, yellow, blue* as a representation of the fundamental elements of life: *fire, earth, water, air (and aether)*. The exhibition juxtaposes primary colours as the foundation of creation and the fundamental elements as the basis of living, reimagining their interactions and their potential to achieve ecological balance. Featuring installation, painting and photographic works from three artists: **Lisa Cristinzo, Camille Jodoin-Eng, and Julie Pasila**, the gallery space transforms into a living palette. Visitors are invited to grapple with the harmony and tension within and between the artworks. By weaving these fundamental forces in the gallery space, the exhibition asks: How can living entities synergize with the palette of elements, and envision more nourishing and sustainable futures?

[The following curatorial conversation takes place among the GAS collective (Gizem Candan, Ann Tong Li and Steffi Sin Tung Ng) on a sunny summer afternoon at Xpace Cultural Centre.]

Gizem: When talking about the thematic of this show - *red, yellow, blue*, it got me thinking about how these primary colours represent, or resemble, the classical elements of life that the ancient Greeks believed. Empedocles, a Greek philosopher, first proposed “The Four Roots” - fire, water, air and earth - as the building blocks of all matter.¹ By articulating the correlation between these “roots” and the primary colours, we could consider fire as red, water and air as blue, and earth as yellow.

¹ William Ellery Leonard, “The Fragments of Empedocles,” *The Monist* 17, no. 3 (1907): 454.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/27900051>.

Ann: And I think aether as a fifth element, which was later introduced by another Greek philosopher, Aristotle, is transparent.² Being invisible and intangible, aether is considered more of a celestial spirit and mystical force. The desire to create in the arts, the collaborative spirit between our artists, Xpace and us as a curatorial collective, all counted as aether.

Steffi: What both of you just mentioned reminded me of this concept of 五行 (*Wuxing*) (*English Translation: Five Phases or Agents*). It was coined as the elemental theory and foundational principle in ancient Chinese philosophy. While the included elements are a bit different; instead of air and aether, they are replaced by wood and metal, both inspire and speak to the making of the cosmos, the basis of our life, and most importantly, ways to achieve ecological balance.

Ann: It is interesting to see how similar Chinese and Greek philosophies are in attempting to understand what and how the universe is made of. I believe our role as curators in this show also engenders a search for ecological balance. How do the artworks in the show embody the different elements and interact with one another? Moreover, Empedocles identified in his elemental theory that love and strife are the two foundational forces that influence the interactions between the "roots". We, as a curatorial collective, have the agency to maneuver through these two forces while working among ourselves, with the artists and their artworks in this specific space.

Gizem: Totally! Being also an oil painter myself, this balance also applies to colours, i.e. creating a painting with a curated palette. By bringing together artworks created by Cristinzo, Jodion-Eng and Pasila that foreground the different components of life, our curatorial work becomes a *Living Palette*, embodying an exploration of ecological balance and entanglement.

Ann: I like the notion of *Living Palette*! If you look at Jodion-Eng's stone pieces from her installation, *Wires Webs Veins Nerves Roots Stems* (2018), it is a palette of living elements. On the carved stones which resemble the element of earth, moss could grow (and has grown) subject to the air, humidity and sunlight where they are. And for Pasila's work *A Puddle, a Pool* (2023-24), the artist uses materials gathering in puddles or pools of water as a visual reference of the bioplastic pieces, which sweat, melt, or harden based on the change of seasons. Living materials that continue to live in the form of artworks, and echoing one another, isn't that the most perfect representation of a living palette?

Steffi: I am also pondering our role as curators. In what ways, do our curatorial and artistic practices disrupt the journey of achieving ecological balance or harmony? Especially in this chaotic time under the immediate threat of climate change, inequalities and wars around the world. I don't have a concrete answer right now, especially as we are still preparing for the show.

² Greek philosopher Aristotle introduced the fifth element of Aether as quintessence, completing the elemental theory that was developed by Empedocles.

However, I share Cristinzo's deep grief for materialism (of course, also wildfires and damaged landscapes) in her large-scale painting *Two Years Lost, Marked Trail* (2023). How much waste did we create at this exhibition and cause a “chaos” to the nature that we lived in? How to balance our environmental responsibilities and curatorial duties?

Gizem: Ecological stress vs harmony. . .from my perspective, we could only sort out diverse ways to balance it instead of viewing that as a dichotomy. The tiny step we took in writing the exhibition didactics with homemade charcoal by burning willow branches serves as a good progress. Returning to the basics and considering nature while curating a show. There are many more curatorial recommendations we could take reference from the resource guide created by the Centre for Sustainable Curating.³

Ann: Going back to Cristinzo’s painting, it also makes me think: while fire provides warmth and lighting, it can also harm the environment and become a mode of destruction. Just like the ancient Chinese saying about water: 水能载舟亦能覆舟 (*The water that bears the boat is the same that swallows it up*), fire, or any other element, becomes a double-edged sword in the cycle of life depending how it is used.

Steffi: That is absolutely true. . .human activities are crucial in influencing this balance.

Gizem: I have to jump in because looking at the works here, the three artists animate these elements into something magical, inviting the audience to activate their five senses which also connect to the cycle of life, and contemplate on the meaning of ecological balance. Aristotle's reimagining of the four elements as hot, wet, cold, and dry gives us an idea of how they interact with one another and transform something else. For instance, when we heat something, we eliminate water from it, and vice versa; when we pour water on fire, we quench it.⁴ This helps us to see how everything in nature is about harmony and balance. Isn't that beautiful?

Steffi: If you look at Pasila’s work *Sand Sigh (Variation II)* (2024), you will see how sun, snow and water collectively disrupt the exposure process and create these beautiful works that bring the audience to an otherworldly experience. Once again we witness how these different forces interact with one another and create something different in a sustainable way.

³ The Centre for Sustainable Curating, the Synthetic Collective, Ioana Dragomir, and Noémie Fortin, *Using the Resources at Hand: Sustainable Exhibition Design*, last modified July 2023, accessed September 10, 2024,

<https://sustainablecurating.ca/using-the-resources-at-hand-sustainable-exhibition-design/>.

⁴ Aristotle, *Meteorology*, trans. E. W. Webster, Accessed September 11, 2024.

<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/meteorology.1.i.html>; The Greek Elements (Aristotle). Accessed September 10, 2024. <https://chemed.chem.purdue.edu/genchem/history/aristotle.html>.

Ann: We are eager to observe the evolution of the *Living Palette*. This exhibition serves only as the beginning of this difficult search for understanding what ecological balance could mean within curatorial and artistic practice. It, of course, extends to ourselves as individuals. This journey, being both controllable and uncontrollable, realistic but also magical, points to a collective, mystical future that is refined from the fundamental forces of nature.

[This conversation ended here as GAS needs to get back to installing the exhibition.]

As the gallery space is transformed into a palette of artistic intervention, it simultaneously becomes a playground. We encourage visitors to explore how the artworks/elements/colours echo with one another. Also, tune in with yourself at the space: How would you locate yourself as part of the ecosystem and contribute to achieving ecological balance?

- GAS Collective