

## “The world is our home. A poem on abstraction”: Para Site’s Cosmin Costinas and Inti Guerrero – interview

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**Para Site’s new exhibition explores the entanglement of Asian traditional painting with dominant modernist vocabularies.**

“The world is our home. A poem on abstraction” opened at Para Site, Hong Kong’s independent contemporary art centre, on 12 December 2015 and continues until 6 March 2016. It presents paintings by Tomie Ohtake, Tang Chang and Robert Motherwell, augmenting the gallery’s “idiosyncratic” analysis of the three artists with one 1960s new media work by Bruce Nauman. *Art Radar* interviews the curators.

Robert Motherwell, ‘Frontier No. 12’, 1958, oil on primed board, 38.1 x 45.7 cm. Private collection.  
Image courtesy Para Site.

Para Site describes “**The world is our home. A poem on abstraction**”, as taking

*its point of departure a moment in the abstract movement of the post-war era, when dominant international vocabularies became entangled with traditional Asian painting in the work of a few artists, working independently and in disparate contexts.*

To demonstrate this entangling, the curators have focussed on the work of three artists operating in the 1950s and 1960s in different societies outside of East Asia. They are American **Robert Motherwell**, Thai artist of Chinese origin **Tang Chang** and Japanese **Tomie Ohtake**, who became a naturalised Brazilian.

The exhibition explores their common appreciation for ink painting and calligraphy, as well as the unique ways they address the social and aesthetic demands of their individual milieux. To differing extents, each artist worked in the margins of mainstream art historical narratives and the exhibition aims to “make a modest contribution to the re-evaluation of national and international canons”.

The title, “The world is our home”, comes from a slogan used by Chinese volunteers fighting on the republican side of the Spanish Civil War. It expresses, according to the press release, “solidarity and identification with the context and struggles of others”.



Bruce Nauman, 'Dance or Exercise on the Perimeter of a Square (Square Dance)', 1968, still from video, 8m:24s. Image courtesy Para Site.

The exhibition also presents a work by Bruce Nauman, his video-performance *Dance or Exercise on the Perimeter of a Square (Square Dance)* (1967–68), shown as “an anomaly” amongst the paintings on display, which “translates, through movement and immateriality, concepts of time, space, and matter found in the works of Motherwell, Ohtake, and Tang”. Nauman’s questioning of the barriers of painting reflects the three painters’ efforts to challenge these boundaries.

*Art Radar* had the opportunity to sit down with the co-curators, **Cosmin Costinas** and **Inti Guerrero**, in the **Para Site** offices, to find out more about the concept behind the exhibition and the artists’ work.

“The world is our home. A poem on abstraction”, 12 December 2015 – 6 March 2016, Para Site, Hong Kong. Installation view. Image courtesy Para Site.

### **This is ostensibly a quite diverse show. What common threads link the three artists represented?**

**Cosmin Costinas (CC):** There’s an obvious common point, which is they were each somehow at an intersection or were interested in how a certain international language of abstraction of the post war era could be expressed, could be enriched, or simply be put in dialogue with a certain tradition of ink painting and calligraphy of East Asia. There is this strong common point behind the lives of the artists gathered in this exhibition.

The less obvious common point is a sense of displacement that characterises each of the three artists. Either a personal displacement of the sort of migration, such as the personal case of Tomie Ohtake, or displacement that arises from one’s identity, like Tang Chang, who was Chinese but always outside the Thai scene and through the employment of an art language that has always been received as alien from central narratives of what art should be in Thailand, there was also a sense of displacement.

And, lastly, with Robert Motherwell, who was interested in this East Asian language from afar as an outsider obviously but who also employed this in a kind of triangulated fashion in a series expressing solidarity with another part of the world. That sense of international solidarity and active, voluntary and aspirational displacement of some sort is for us another important principle that organises the exhibition.



Robert Motherwell, 'Gesture Series (A)', 1969, acrylic on paper, 77.5 x 57.2 cm. Private collection.  
Image courtesy Para Site.

**Tell us about Robert Motherwell's works. Although he was a major member of the American Abstract Expressionist school, his paintings, including the well-known series "Elegy to the Spanish Republic",**

## often feature formal characteristics derived from Chinese and Japanese painting. Didn't other Abstract Expressionists also emulate Asian art?

**CC:** This show does not actually want to make any statement regarding choosing one artist over the other. In our art historical exhibitions at Para Site the selection of artists is usually idiosyncratic to a certain extent. So they are not meant to be exhaustive. We start from the artists and arrive at the stories they are telling. We present those stories as they are, but acknowledging there could be other artists doing the same.

Robert Motherwell, 'Iberia No. 30', 1969, acrylic on canvas, 20.3 x 25.4 cm. Private collection.  
Image courtesy Para Site.

### How did Motherwell differ from Tomie Otake and Tang Chang?

**CC:** In a way [Motherwell] was the most intellectual and the less formalist, less formally-motivated in his fascination with Asian art. If we look at Motherwell, things get complicated because he used his most important series of abstract works as a kind of continuous dedication to the republican side in the Spanish Civil War and this is something he did until his death in 1991. In the timeline, the specific relevancy of the Spanish Civil War was long gone. So this [series] was used as a kind of metaphor for fascism manifesting in many different ways. The last one was in 1990, even after [Ronald] Reagan stopped being president [of the United States], so it's clear that the Spanish Republic and the Spanish War was less relevant and this was used as metaphor for what he considered to be the great battles of these years.

**Inti Guerrero (IG):** The basic progression of the elegies started as a small drawing as part of a letter that Motherwell sent to a friend, and in 1990 the last elegy measures four metres by two! It's as if this monster kept on mutating and this darkness became even more uncontrollable in the progression of fascism.

Tang Chang, 'White on White 6', ca. 1966, oil on canvas with impasto, 80.7 x 93 cm. The Tang Chang Estate. Image courtesy Para Site.

### How did the Asian artists exhibited relate to Western modernism?

**CC: Liu Kuo-sung** (刘国松), the Chinese Taiwanese modern ink master, said they were all trying in the 1950s to emulate Western painting, Western abstract painting, and then they came to Motherwell and they realised that what he was doing was trying to emulate traditional Chinese and Asian ink painting and, anecdotally, he said "Well, if he's doing it, why shouldn't we do it?"

Tang Chang's ethnic origin was partially responsible for projecting a kind of 'Chinese-ness' in his language. Which is interesting, because a lot of the actual sources of his works are more Japanese and inspired more by Japanese art and magazines that were coming via Japan. So obviously the link between one's own identity and these actual languages is very tenuous and very complicated. And if you look at [Tang Chang's] own exclusion or his own semi-marginalisation in the canon of Thai art, it is indeed connected to his sense of 'alien-ness', because he is seen as too Chinese and sometimes he is seen as being too international, too generic, too Western in that sense.

Tang Chang, 'Untitled 2', 1975, oil on canvas, 211 x 248 cm. The Tang Chang Estate. Image courtesy Para Site.

This is not an absolute narrative. That's why I use the term 'semi-marginalisation', because there is also quasi-unanimous acknowledgment of his importance as a leading figure of modern art in Thailand. His marginalisation was never absolute. It's a kind of negotiation. Every country has its own way of marginalising minorities as nonconforming individuals. But Thailand is even more complicated. Partially because the Chinese Thai are in many ways a kind of elite in Thailand. So it's not actually a group that is

disadvantaged like African-Americans in the US. It's a much more complicated relationship. It's more about different individuals' choices of how Thai they actually want to be. The leading artists who are at the core of the Thai canon have very similar ethnic origins in China as does Tang Chang.

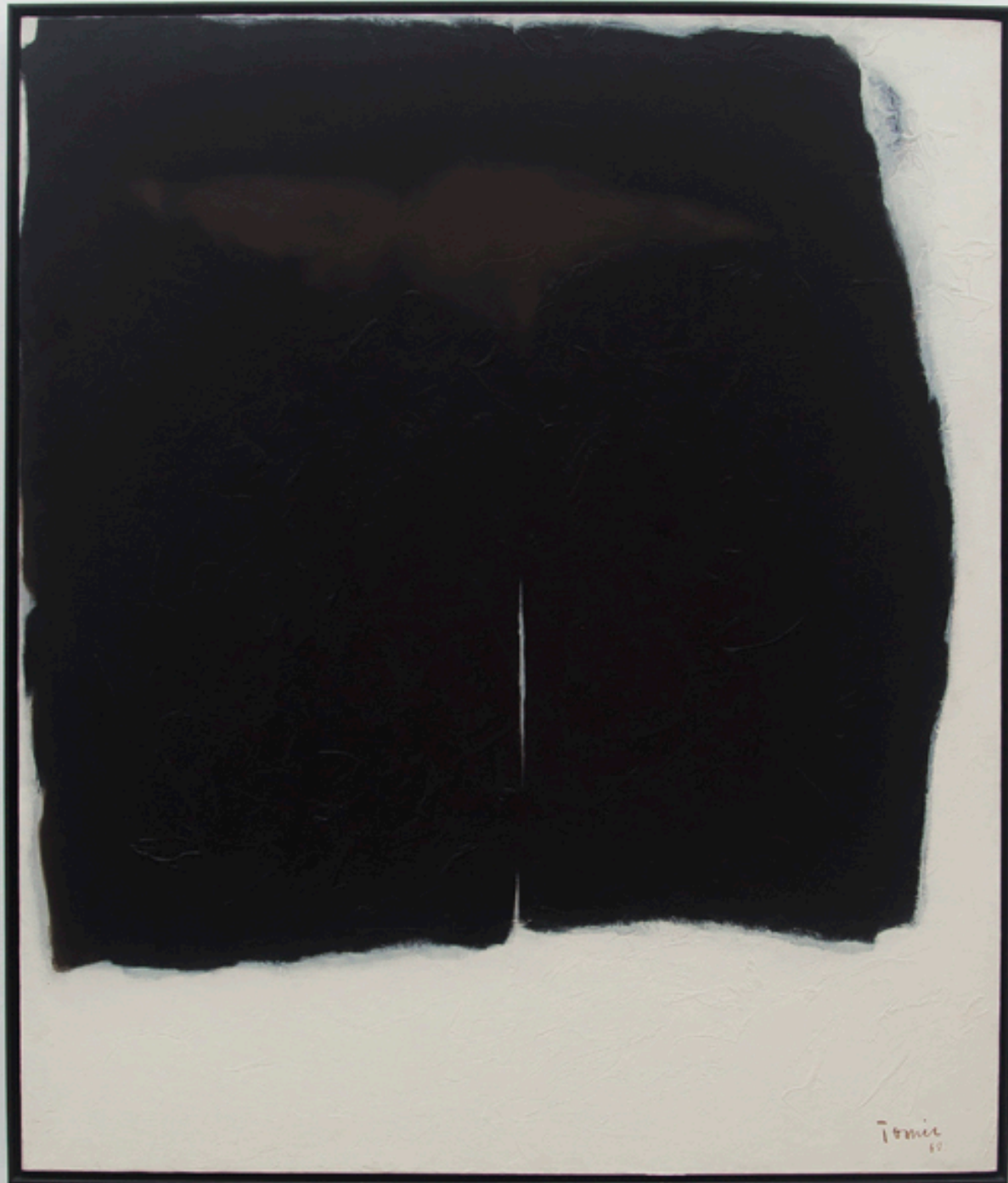
**IG:** Tang Chang, as a figure in art history in Thailand, does not only belong to this gestural large-scale work and that is why we also selected some drawing poetry which shows the complexity of this artist, the difference, and other notions of abstracting the world through language. And it's evident that the idea of calligraphy with his drawings creations have a political inclination. So [Motherwell, Tang Chang and Tomie Ohtake] are united; they all experimented with abstraction, [but] their genealogies took completely different turns. Visually, there's something about how all of these possibilities are very much grounded on how they treated form, colour, things you might call 'formalist', but they start to tell you so many more narratives.

Tomie Ohtake, 'Untitled', 1963, oil on canvas, 106 x 76 cm. The Tomie Ohtake Estate and Nara Roesler, São Paulo. Image courtesy Para Site.

### **How does Tomie Ohtake fit into Brazilian modern art conversations?**

**IG:** Tomie Ohtake is very well known within the national discourse of art history in Brazil, but she's unknown in Asia and lesser-known in the Euro-American context, something of a forgotten figure. There is an interesting narrative about Abstract Expressionism, an artistic language to which the so-called 'free world' identified with as a counter-aesthetic to social realism and the propaganda of communism and, indeed, Brazil was and somehow still is part of the West and the modern progress-oriented modernity.

But that narrative, though symbolically true, is also only one single narrative and it might eclipse the analytical importance of understanding the process of painting that this amazing artist did throughout decades, this very strange way of appropriating traditional arts from Asia, not only formalist productions but very important contributions that might feel closer to contemporary ideas of understanding movement and forms that are not represented in what the idea of Abstract Expressionist painting has been associated with.



Tomie Ohtake, 'Untitled', 1962, oil on canvas, 129 x 110 cm. Private collection. Image courtesy Para Site.

**IG:** Ohtake started her Western-style art training as part of her schooling with a Japanese artist [Keisuke Sugano] who was visiting Brazil at the time because of the São Paulo Biennale. She became generally interested in abstract languages and started to experiment on her own. She is part of a less-triumphant history of abstract painting [in Brazil] because the more-known one internationally and the one more written about locally in Brazil is geometrical abstraction such as the Concrete and Neo-concrete artists that had more of a Constructivist and Bauhaus genealogy. That main production in Brazil was applauded and went hand-in-hand with the general modern ideology of 'the modern' in Brazil at the time.

Her relationship was with a very-defined group of Japanese-Brazilian artists, which was basically like an artist's club. But these artists were very much experimenting with different languages of modern art, not only abstraction. So, some were more fauvists, some were more cubists. It was generally like an immigrant bohemian club in the context of metropolitan life in São Paulo. Japan at that time was very progressive. In the 1910s and 1920s in Japan there was a Westernisation of many parts of society and in the arts a lot of training in Western-style painting was received in many schools [Ohtake was born in 1913 and came to Brazil

in 1936].

There were a lot of anglophile publications and so some members of [Ohtake's group] literally gathered around this imaginative community of Japanese cosmopolitan bohemian culture, where one of their monthly activities was to read Japanese art magazines which were not about Japan but were about modern European art but written in Japanese. That is what they were waiting for in Brazil and liked to discuss.

Tomie Ohtake, 'Untitled', 1959, oil on canvas, 97 x 77 cm. The Tomie Ohtake Estate and Nara Roesler, São Paulo. Image courtesy Para Site.

### What are today's young artists to make of this show?

**IG:** Actually, [Ohtake's] analytical idea of time and temporality in relation to painting actually bring her to another field; I think that's why her paintings still speak contemporarily. [In Para Site's exhibition] we created this social context, but precisely because it becomes so layered they are not completely historicised. They keep on questioning us. There is something happening there and that only happens in a very retinal experience with these paintings and, at the end, this exhibition is a contemporary art show because of that, because they are painters who keep on questioning our perspective of reality, of representation, of our own identity toward those canvases. And that is how this very spiritual sense actually does take place. [Ohtake] appropriated it and could translate it in terms of painting.

Tang Chang, 'Untitled No. 3', 1960, oil on canvas, 81 x 92.5 cm. The Tang Chang Estate. Image courtesy Para Site.

**CC:** They were all modern artists and very modern individuals living in the 20th century in very urban contexts with very modern problems. The fact that the two ethnically Asian artists in the show referred to traditional Asian forms is somehow similar to how the white North American artist chose to refer to the same tradition. So one can argue that in each case these were primarily intellectual choices. Even if for the two Asians they might have had biographical, identity implications for them on a personal level or in the way their surrounding context regarded these choices, at the end of the day they were primarily intellectual choices of very modern cosmopolitan urban figures.

**James Ellis**

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