

Ways of Water:
Victoria Yau's Transpacific Waterscapes

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In 1960, Victoria Yau (1939–2023) moved from the shores of Taiwan to the West Coast of the United States, sojourning through art programs in Washington and Los Angeles before making her home in Evanston, Illinois, near the expansive waters of Lake Michigan. Uprooted from her homeland at the age of twenty, Yau navigated the complexities of American society, culture, and a predominantly white art world on her own as one of the earliest Asian American women artists. Yau's transpacific journey across waters, in turn, shaped her multimedia artistic practice. Yau's oeuvre spans diverse themes and subjects, but many of her works contemplate, experiment with, and play upon the fascinating forms and ways of water—an essential, life-giving element.

Many of Yau's works visualize water's liquid rhythms: the way a stream cuts through rock, a wave crests and falls, or mist blurs the boundary between air and earth. Among her collections, "Raindrops" directly engages with water's shifting forms, though her exploration of aqueous themes extends beyond a single series. Water, for Yau, is not just a subject but both an artistic metaphor and method: unbounded, adaptable, and inherently dynamic. Water's multiform nature, along with its capacity to flow, transform, and connect, permeates her variegated experimentation with ink, watercolor, oil, fabric, and acrylic. Among the twenty-five pieces carefully selected and curated by Emma Rose Gudewicz here at the Evanston Art Center, the ink work *Big Steps* (1995) shows Yau's signature play with ink techniques in traditional Chinese paintings. Steps of water take form in blurry, geometric blots of ink; they press toward the negative white space, poised, shifting, and drawn into a near-connection, their edges rippling across the paper as they reach and stretch. Their shapes, though abstract, evoke both the Chinese inkstone and its pool of ink in the literati studio, now seemingly animated, as though coming to life from a classical Chinese strange tale where non-human beings become spirited.



Big Steps (1995): Ink on paper.

Receding (1998) visualizes the essence of withdrawal, an ebbing motion formed in both restraint and release. The watercolor *Water Shadows* (1993) gives water a tangible presence and projects its shadows onto the paper as if onto a weathered wall, dappled and mottled with dusk-lit mossy greens. The acrylic *Shoreline* (2001) and *Water of Spring* (2001) illustrate the shimmering, rippling, and folding of water's movements, rendered in blue, violet dashes and a contemplative dynamism created by the layered brushstrokes. *Fast River* (1996) conjures the blur of rapid flows. The dark, misty layers in *River Bend* (2003) hint at the bending of water and a moment of deepening currents both aqueous and affective: translucent, fluid emotional currents swirling up in shadows of blues. These works exhibit a striking affinity and bond with water; they are abstract waterscapes that capture the full spectrum of water's forms—mist, cloud, raindrops, dewdrops, tide, and sea foams—while embodying its protean physicality and remarkable adaptability.



Receding (1998): Ink on paper.



Water Shadows (1993): Watercolor.

Such affinity with water is at once artistic, deeply personal, and cultural. Living at the edge of Lake Michigan (where she painted and volunteered at the old Evanston Art Center by Lighthouse Beach), Yau had regularly expressed in the 1970s a wistful desire to “return to Formosa” (the “beautiful island,” Taiwan), where she spent her teenage years. Water, however, was more than a connection to a geographical home; it was a conduit to Chinese cultural philosophy. Yau’s 1993 Taipei exhibition was titled “Chapter of Delight in Water (*Yishui pian*),” with its English counterpart, “Chapter of Tranquility.” The phrase “Delight in Water” references a Confucian teaching: “The wise find joy in water, the benevolent find joy in mountains (*zhizhe le shui, renzhe le shan*),” which links water to wisdom, adaptability, and movement. It also evokes the well-known Daoist saying, “The highest goodness is like water (*shangshan ruo shui*),” which highlights water’s virtue of effortless flow and quiet nourishment.

Yau’s aesthetics—bold, abstract, and experimental—integrate these philosophical elements from traditional Chinese thought. In her essay “My Space and My Art,” she draws on the classical trope of “living water,” borrowed from a Song Dynasty poem by a prominent Neo-Confucian philosopher. She writes, “Changing environment is important, because the mind can get [stale]. Keep [it] from [becoming] monotonous. I try to keep my visual experience continue circulating as a living water as active spring.”¹ For Yau, making art is akin to circulating a visual experience like a

¹ Victoria Yau, “My Space and My Art,” unpublished manuscript from her personal archive, generously provided by Philip Yau, who also shared insights into her life and artistic philosophy.

“living water.” She describes the artistic process itself as “mountains and waters” (*shanshui*, the classical term for Chinese landscape painting), a dynamic and life-making space shaped by fluidity and transformation.² To feel at home with water, then, is to feel at home with art and the expansive space it creates.

Water also entered Yau’s works in unexpected ways, sometimes beyond her control. In late 2022, when Yau was sadly away in hospice, water pipes burst in her Evanston home, which also served as her primary studio, tragically damaging many of her pieces. Yet in the works that survived, rescued and preserved by the staff of the Heritage Museum of Asian Art, water left its own mark not as destruction, but as an extension of Yau’s artistic vision. Her pieces that drew from traditional Chinese ink and paper techniques, in particular, reveal a striking transformation: the water, rather than simply damaging them, reaccentuated the paper’s textures, echoing the very processes Yau sought to explore in her art. The movement of ink across paper mirrors water’s rhythms as it carves through landscapes and reshapes terrains over time, absorbing, diffusing, settling. In these water-altered works, the ink appears to have continued its free movement and reinforced Yau’s hydro-aesthetic vision: fluid, porous, ever-moving, and ever-changing.

² Liu Xunmei (Victoria Yau), “Cong fuyun lou dao yuanjie zhai,” in *Ye Jiaying jiaoshou bashi huadan ji guoji cixue yantaohui* (Nankai daxue shubanshe, 2004), 289.