



Digital Memoir of the South China Sea

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Abstract:

A Chinese junk in full sail is one of most enduring symbols of Hong Kong's Victoria Harbour and the surrounding South China Sea, which brings life and commerce to the region. Inspired by this symbol of Chinese culture along with other found artifacts, I have created a series of digital artworks based on my childhood memories of these iconic symbols of my Hong Kong upbringing. This series of work is based on deconstructed photographs of vintage patterns and sections of objects that were once common household and everyday articles. I then manipulate and reformat them into swirling designs of color that can only be described as having an association with contemporary digital images of fractals. Another category of found objects that appear in my work are natural wonders, such as shells and plants that are commonly found on Hong Kong's rocky shores. My journey of selecting objects to photograph, deconstruct, manipulate, print, exhibit, and reflect on is integral to my artistic research. As such, it comprises material critical to understanding my identity as a bicultural artist and how I have come to understand certain cultural aspects of my youth as a person of Chinese heritage growing up in the harbour city of Hong Kong. In this paper, I intend to use complex spiral digital art to trace the inspirational forms that frequently materialize in my work. This work was exhibited in Hong Kong in March 2014 in conjunction with an explanation on how it might influence the visual culture there.

Keywords: *Practice-Based Research; Digital Art; Nostalgic Art; Memory; Digital Photography and Imaging*

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Digital Memoir of the South China Sea

Shui Kong Ho

INTRODUCTION

A Chinese junk in full sail may be one of most enduring symbols of Hong Kong's Victoria Harbour and the surrounding South China Sea, which brings life and commerce to the delta of the Pearl River, southern China. Inspired by this symbol of Chinese culture along with other found ceramic artifacts, allowed me to create a series of digital artworks based on my childhood memories of these iconic symbols of my Hong Kong upbringing. This series, entitled *Digital Memoir of the South China Sea*, is a body of work based on the deconstruction of photographs of vintage patterns and sections of objects that were once common household and everyday articles. I then manipulated and reformatted them into swirling designs of color and texture that can only be described as having an association with contemporary digital images of fractals. Another category of found objects that appear in this work are natural wonders, such as seashells, flowers and leaves that are commonly found on Hong Kong's rocky shores and beaches in Brunei Darussalam.

The photographs that appear in *Digital Memoir of the South China Sea* were created through practice-based research. The work is about new sensory experiences in Brunei Darussalam mingled with memories of familiar old ones in Hong Kong. Sharing the experience of a reconnection to nature and evolving memories is a reminder of a relational experience familiar to people but one they may have forgotten.

My journey in selecting objects to photograph, deconstruct, manipulate, print, exhibit, and reflect on is all part of my artistic research. As such, it comprises material critical to understanding my identity as a bicultural artist and it also charts how I have come to understand certain cultural aspects of my youth as a person of Chinese heritage growing up in the harbour city of Hong Kong and presently living along the coastline of the South China Sea in Muara, Brunei Darussalam.

Hong Kong as the Cultural Frontier of the South China Sea

From a modest fishing village in the south coast of China transformed into an international metropolitan city, Hong Kong has gone through tremendous changes in its political, economic, socio-cultural and natural environments over the past 100 years. Born and raised in Hong Kong from the 1960s to 1990s, I have witnessed the changes from a tiny colonial seaport, enclosed by the Pearl River Delta and the South China Sea, into a special administrative region of China—one of the world's leading international financial centres. In my memories, the sea colour of Victoria Harbour is greenish blue, like turquoise oil paint, however, today the harbour's atmosphere and water have turned a smoggy brown in the daytime (Image 1). There are artificial colours at night. Colourful neon lights reflect on the surrounding harbour water. Nowadays, the only places in Hong Kong to look for the turquoise sea colour may be the offshore islands.



Image 1: Kong Ho. *Victoria Harbour Sunset*, 2007. Digital print, 16"H x 20"W.

My first recollection of exposure to the South China Sea is from my childhood summer camp experience in Cheung Chau (an offshore island of Hong Kong) in the early 1970s. Organised by Father Chan, an Italian Catholic Priest, and other voluntary Catholic helpers, around twenty kids with disabilities were brought to Tung Wan Beach of Cheung Chau by a British military landing assault craft. I was one of those kids. This exposure to the ‘great outdoors’ is quite possibly the first "connected to nature" experience that I can remember from my childhood life in Hong Kong.

Although some people perceive nature as uninteresting or even unsafe, my first encounter with the South China Sea was a memorable one. The beige sands mixed with various seashells and shards washed up on the beach of Tung Wan turned out to be highlights of my childhood life. The turquoise colour of the seawater (Image 2), mingled with the salty smell of the ocean breeze helped me feel a sense of oneness with nature. Furthermore, this first memory of nature has somehow become what seems to be the driving force of my artistic inspiration to continue developing my art around natural themes. No matter if it is in my complex fractal digital art Image 3) memoiristic digital photographs, dissolving videos or transcendental printings, nature is always a favourite leitmotif.

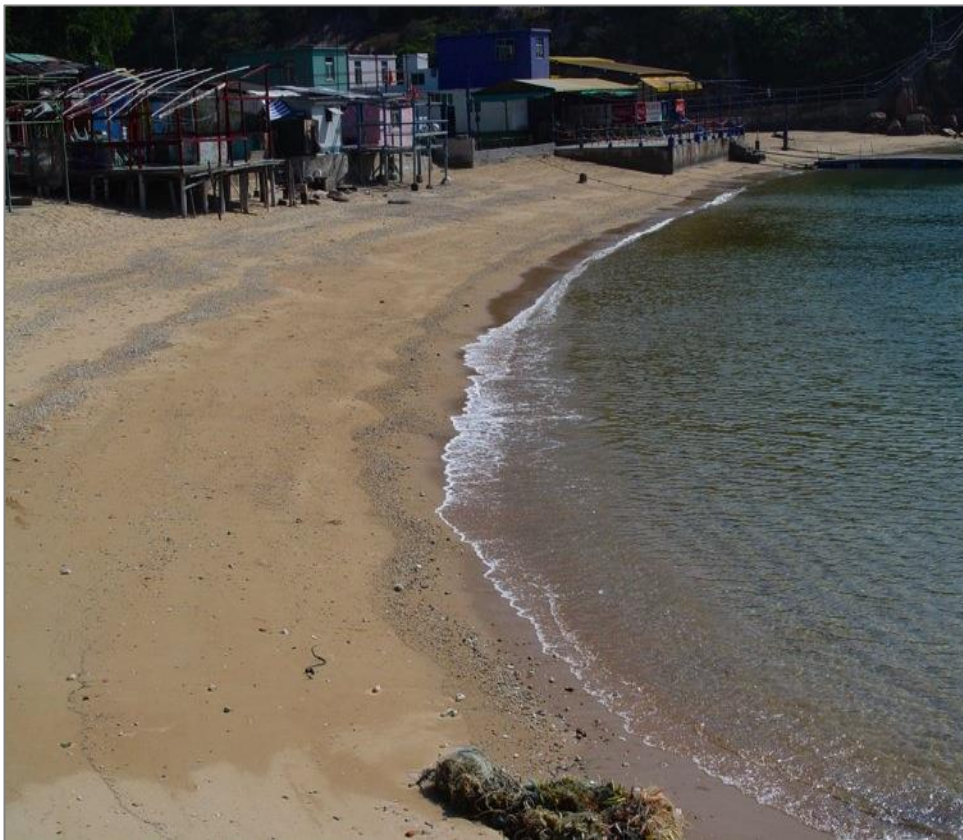


Image 2: Kong Ho. *Po Toi Island Beach*, 2009. Digital print, 16"H x 20"W.



Image 3: Kong Ho. *Shell Becoming a Parrot*. 2012. Digital print, 16"H x 16"W.

Memory as Evolving Fragment of Experience

Our memories are unreliable (Hogenboom 2013). Whenever we recall our memories, we reconstruct parts of images stored in collections of memory forming cells. According to Xu Liu (2013), "the differing combination of cells could partly explain why memories are not static like a photograph, but constantly evolving" (as cited in *BBC News*, 2013). As a sensitive visual artist, I try to capture moments of my memories through art. However, it is hard for anyone to have an explicit and complete picture of one's specific memory. It is similar to our memory of colours, which is always shifting and uncertain. It is not because we run out of specific names for colours in our art vocabulary, but our incapacity to recall fully the specific colour in our memory cells, gives rise to various interpretations.



Image 4: Kong Ho. *Reinvented Sensations*. 2013. Digital print, 16"H x 16"W.

As Xu Liu (2013) suggests, "every time we think we remember something, we could also be making changes to that memory – sometimes we realize sometimes we don't." This is similar to the art making experience of my deconstructive fractal-look digital art. The process by which my digital artworks are created along with the media used in the works is a very important part of the final statement or content of the work. For example, in my recent digital art piece (Image 4), which relies on the fractal effect, my intention is to articulate a remembered state of mind through the process of creating the image. Briggs (1992: 32) describes fractals as the tracks and marks left by the process of dynamical change:

"Fractals describe the roughness of the world, its energy, its dynamical changes and transformations. Fractals are images of the way things fold and unfold, feeding back into each other and themselves. The study of fractals has confirmed many of the chaologists' insights into chaos, and has uncovered some unexpected secrets of nature's dynamical movements as well."

Digital imaging can create layers, colors, textures, dimensions, repetitions, rotations and transformations to form differing combinations and changes, which are different from hand-drawn static composition. I cannot visualize the final outcome of the images, but the process always reminds me of my free-floating fractured memory with no defined space or time. Moreover, each magnification of my digital fractal image reveals more details of the similar pattern, which is hard to present in a traditional hand-painted image.

When I start out to make an image I know that I am only creating an illusion. Through the use of manipulated and often humble found objects from the beach, like common seashells, ceramic shards, and beach leaves, I begin to enhance that object's most outstanding feature. This coupled with my recollection of having found the seashell or shard or leaf on a great day adds to my desire to work the subject into an image that can engage others into seeing the fabulous natural world around us. The composition of this recent body of work is created to form a transcendental kind of space which may turn out to include spiral, rotational, transforming, dissolving, or overlapping elements. The picture plane may end up resembling a memory or a moment or a place with no beginning or end, or it may be more like the interweaving of time and space. *White Costumed Shells* (Image 5) reveals the transfiguration of a simple yellow white ark shell. Taken on Muara Beach in Brunei, it expresses my passion for the South China Sea and the Fibonacci sequence mingled with my delight at seeing one of Brunei's lovely common seashells up close.

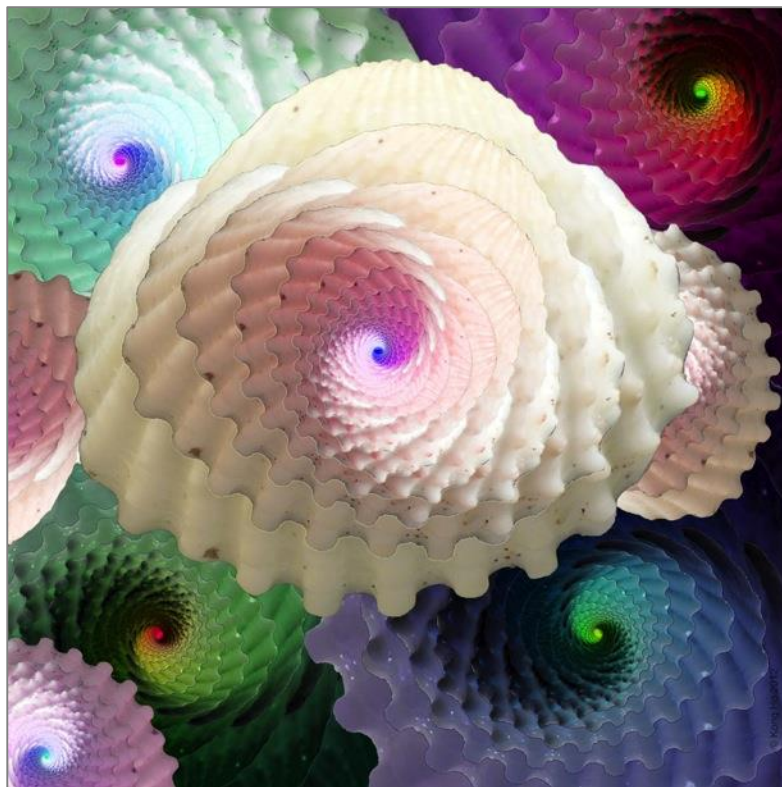


Image 5: Kong Ho. *White Costumed Shells*. 2013. Digital print, 16"H x 16"W.

I never have a preconceived notion of how my digital images will turn out. There is always uncertainty around how to depict timeless moments or evolving memories. However, repeatedly I transfigures those moments and memories into digital images. Digital art, like painting, allows me to explore colours and use my intuition to direct images to completion that finally feel "right" and matches my memories. In a way, the digital medium affords me the luxury of working in a manner that is not only original and bold in its outcome, but also practical because it is so transportable and printable. This new method of working has come to affect almost every aspect of my art and life. My latest work with a focus on impermanence or transition follows the principles put forth in the writings of French art historian Hippolyte Taine (Taine 1866 [1865]: 291) in his essay "Le Bouddhisme":

"Nature is ... an infinite chain of causes from effects and effects from causes, an infinite progeny into the past and the future of decompositions and recompositions with no beginning and no end. Such is the view of the whole to which [Buddhists] are led, on the one hand, by their main theme of nothingness and, on the other, by the spectacle of things incessantly changing. Having suppressed fixed causes, there remains only the series of changing effects. Thereupon, the imagination comes alive."

Reconnection to the Past and Nature

The creative impetus or intent behind my recent spiral fractal digital art is to reconnect to my past experience with the South China Sea. Psychologically, the motivation behind the transfigurations of a common found object washed up on the beach of Hong Kong or Brunei is to hold on to the essence of the transitional image, feeling, memory, time and space of a fleeting moment. *Whirling Chinese Cranes* (Image 6) suggests the nostalgic feeling of childhood life with my now deceased parents in Hong Kong. The whirling composition reveals the synthesis of various ceramic shards of a typical Chinese teacup with a blue crane pattern from the 1960s. The fragment of this traditional common Chinese blue and white teacup with a unique blue crane pattern, not only recalls childhood memories of having a pleasant Chinese tea breakfast with his parents in Hong Kong, but also provides a new dimension or meaning to my current living environment in Borneo. I searched for this old teacup in Hong Kong for several years but only found two well-preserved blue crane teacups during a visit to Kuching in Sarawak, Malaysia in 2013. It may seem contradictory to try to rematerialize that which is already gone, but historically a large part of humankind's reasons for making art seems to have gone into this endeavor.



Image 6: Kong Ho. *Whirling Chinese Cranes*. 2013. Digital print, 16"H x 16"W.

Human life is full of contradictions and so is art. As an artist, I try to capture those timeless moments or impermanent memories in our lives through reconnection with nature and ourselves. It is not clear that whether the past affects the present or the present is an illusion of the past. Similarly, we cannot be sure whether we can live without nature or our memories. The only certainty is that our world and personal experience is in a state of flux. The connection to nature and our past gives us a reason for saving nature. It stops us from creating a world where nature is devalued.

The South China Sea is not just a logistics problem about geographical location or a territorial disputes. Political conflicts are important to study, but personal interactions between individuals and the environment is also significant. Because we are living in a globalized world where the notion of pluralistic art has become the new mainstream norm, my reasons and beliefs for making art do not necessarily fit the expectations of the competitive art world. For the past several decades I have been cultivating a relationship between the concepts of Zen Buddhism and my art. I transform digital images using the motifs of simple flowers, leaves and seashells in a Zen Buddhist intuitive manner. This means that on some levels, how or why the final composition is arrived at remains open and spontaneous. Sometimes I have to just let go and trust my instincts.

This is the kind of intuitive feeling that comes from losing oneself in nature's enormity. According to Baas (2005: 11), "Buddhism challenges thinking as a path to knowing. And what both the creation and the perception of art share with Buddhist meditation practice is that they allow us to forget ourselves and thus realize ourselves. They are parallel practices." This sort of experience has led me to try and capture the sublime and over-whelming natural elements that make up the patterns of nature unconsciously. Even though I have relocated to many places during the past twenty years: from humid Hong Kong to dry Texas; hot Texas to cold Pennsylvania; and from snowy Pennsylvania to sunny Brunei, the way the South China Sea looks when the sun sets with its peaceful sunbeams (Image 7) is the one thing that feels the same and familiar to me.

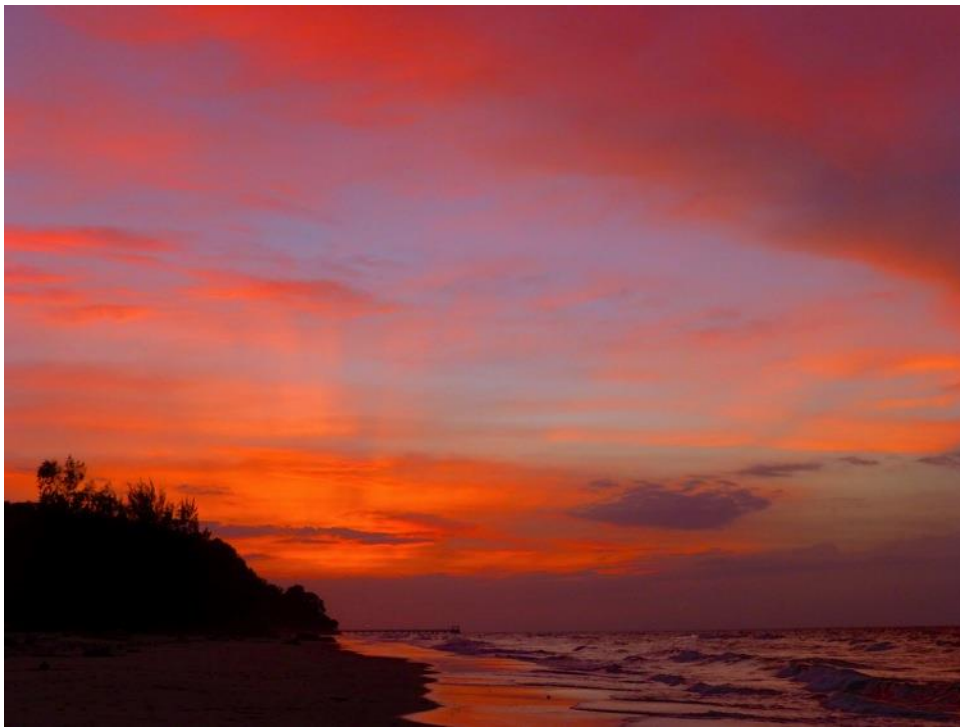


Image 7: Kong Ho. *Muara Beach Sunset*, 2013. Digital print, 16"H x 20"W.

Looking back on the work produced for my exhibition in March 2014, I can see that these digital images carry a common thread, a growing nostalgia for the past and a romantic attitude towards nature and life.

The visually attractive *Beach Leaf Litter* (Image 8) resembles the "picturesque" style of late eighteenth century Romanticism with its carefully orchestrated casualness of composition. The colourful and attractive appearance of this spiral beach leaf is not the content of my art but instead the leaf embodies the transitory nature of life and evolving memories revealed as an expression of nature. I believe that before I can make art, whether digital photography or painting, certain elements must present, including a bitter-sweet mix of emotions. According to the Taoist/Buddhist perspective, the transient nature of life can be seen in natural phenomena, such as the cyclical nature of a flower or leaf that goes from fresh growth to decay. The beauty of a short-lived leaf evokes a melancholic sense of the transience of life and leaves a fragment of memory. Digital images of found-objects taken in different places along the coastline of the South China Sea where I have visited before still feel timeless to me, but they take on a slightly intangible almost ethereal quality when I transfigure them.



Image 8: Kong Ho. *Beach Leaf Litter*. 2012. Digital print, 16"H x 16"W.

Conclusion: Transpersonal Experience

The visual styles of my spiral fractal-inspired digital art series based on spiraling forms, and the nostalgic quality of my "memoiristic" digital photographs of found-objects from the South China Sea have their starting point in the real world. Yet, the same representational starting point that grounds the photos in the center of fantastic, make-believe colours also transforms them before the viewer's eyes into pure patterns and designs. This is something that I see as being akin to Claude Monet's impressionist master work, *Water Lilies*. The water lilies are about colours and a sense of place, which are not painted in a realistic style. However, the poetic and time-shifting feeling of Monet's *Water Lilies* echoes the qualities that I am seeking in my art. As Baas (2005: 19) notes about Monet's *Water Lilies*:

"The painting seems to contain a moment or—better—a totality of moments in deep summer, when the greens go dark and the water reflects a bottomless sky. The sensation of a moment I wasn't even aware of losing is suddenly mine again. Or maybe what the painting embodies is change itself, and the awareness is an awareness of time and the losses that time brings."

In my new series of digital art, I intend to use spiral fractal-look digital art to trace the inspirational forms that frequently materialize in my work. These manipulated digital artworks were showcased in a group exhibition, "Mural•list•mania: Multimedia Art Exhibition," in Hong Kong in March 2014 alongside a gallery talk explaining the creative concepts behind my spiral digital art.

Just as with everything else in life, the images in my art appear to have fluid meanings and even to take on different physical characteristics when one looks carefully at the structure of the work and contemplates the image as a whole. *Starry Shells* (Image 9) reveals the synthesis of a single view of a marine mollusk shell. The side view of this common seashell with a brown-orange dash-line pattern, not only recalls my memory of the South China Sea in Hong Kong, but also provides a new imaginative dimension of a starry night. On another level, my digital art can be considered as visual interpretations of the Taoist order of nature and Buddhist spiritual enlightenment. My art reflects the spirit or essence of the Buddhist/Taoist philosophy. The notion of a harmonious wholeness and eternal order that connects human beings to nature and to the Yin and Yang forces that govern the cosmos, which is beyond time and space.



Image 9: Kong Ho. *Starry Shells*, 2013. Digital print, 16"H x 16"W.

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