

At One with the Elements

# AT ONE WITH THE ELEMENTS

LEIGH WEN



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June 17 – August 13, 2023

American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center

Washington, DC

Curated by Sarah Tanguy





Leigh Wen, *Peony 22*, 2020. Oil on linen, 69 1/5 x 64 in.



## FOREWORD

It is my pleasure to welcome Leigh Wen to the American University Museum. Born in Taipei, Taiwan, and now living in the United States, Wen's art reveals her search for balance in these "interesting" times between darkness and light, nature and culture, harmony and chaos, East and West. Describing her own internal struggle, Wen also describes the artist's dilemma: "The ancient philosophies of my homeland, which teach self-discipline and selflessness, collide and mingle with Western notions of ego, alienation, and desire... Something of the self is lost in the resulting tangle, and then regained, only to be lost again."<sup>1</sup>

I first saw Leigh Wen's work in Taiwan at ART TAIPEI 2018, one of the oldest contemporary art fairs in the Asia-Pacific region. I was there researching art for potential exhibitions with David Furchgott, founder of International Art & Artists, and we were both impressed with Wen's stunning installation. I began a conversation, and then negotiations, with Wen to bring her work to the American University Museum. Then COVID happened and all our plans were put on hold as the museum was forced to cancel or postpone more than 30 exhibitions.

Now, at long last, we are bringing Wen's timely art to Washington, DC. Much of the credit for our success goes to Sarah Tanguy, brought on as an independent curator to work with Wen and American University Museum staff to manage the complexities of curating an international show, moving it across borders and through bureaucracies. Tanguy's long tenure in the U.S. Department of State's Office of Art in Embassies, and her fine diplomatic acumen, perfectly prepared her to meet the challenges posed by governments and, even more formidable, universities.

Of course, the curatorial and logistical demands of bringing an international show of this size and scope to Washington are surpassed only by the financial demands. It took a great team of supporters. I must again thank our friends at the Embassy of the Republic of China/Taiwan for another successful collaboration. Also essential to the success of this project was the sponsorship of the Taiwan Academy, the Ministry of Culture, and the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office in the United States (TECRO). On behalf of the students, faculty, staff, friends and neighbors of the American University Museum, we thank you!

Jack Rasmussen  
Director and Curator,  
American University Museum  
at the Katzen Arts Center,  
Washington, DC

<sup>1</sup> Leigh Wen, Artist Statement for American University Museum, April 9, 2023.



# ARISE

Lines, in Leigh Wen’s art, are the defining agent. They form the hidden pulse and layered score of all the paintings, sculptures, and mixed media works on view in “At One with the Elements.” Etched deep into the surface, they spring and scamper across lush passages of graduated colors, distilling nature’s underlying forces into energized patterns of concentrated beauty.

**by Sarah Tanguy**



Leigh Wen, *Encompassing I*, 2014. Oil on canvas, 57 x 89 in.

Born in a farmhouse in Yingge, a southwestern district in New Taipei City famous for its ceramic production, Wen remembers, as a child, the wind rustling through unglazed windows and roots growing under the floor. She remembers water dripping from a leaky roof. Above all, she remembers the catastrophic flood of Typhoon Alan that struck Taiwan in 1959 and how her father would recount the story of its destruction. This first-hand experience of nature's power inspired a lifelong exploration of water, fire, earth, and air, the four elements in Western cosmology. In her current practice, keen observation filtered through memories and events yields meditative works that strike an edgy balance between disaster and recovery, chaos and order, and representation and abstraction.



Leigh Wen, *Fire X*, 2012. Oil on linen, 59 4/5 in. diameter.





Leigh Wen, *Mid Summer Morning Glim V*, 2019. Oil on linen, 78 3/4 x 131 4/5 in.

Wen moved to the United States to study art at 25, later earning a Master of Fine Arts degree from the State University of New York at Albany. This was the first of many transglobal trips to and from Taiwan that laid the foundation for her fluid bi-national identity. By this time, she was already versed in traditional Chinese painting and calligraphy, where black ink is applied onto white paper, and was recognized internationally for her lively and versatile brushwork. She had also done etching and engraving, techniques that resonated with her family's business of incising pots and plates with a sharp instrument. Wen took up oils and soon fell in love with their colors and glazes. After trying photorealism and Western notions of perspective, however, she realized that she couldn't abandon the Eastern understanding of a charged negative space and the use of the silhouette—a tradition

coinciding with the invention of paper in China in early CE. These divergent backgrounds formed the creation in her thirties of a syncretic language that incorporates the romantic idealism of the Hudson River School, the geometric formalism of minimalist painting, and the emotive expression of feminist art with the all-encompassing and complementary forces of Yin-Yang.

The exhibition offers a broad look into Wen's work and her experiments with medium and format. In her overlapping series about the elements, psycho-emotional states transform into atmospheric tableaux that range in time and space from the terrestrial to the celestial and feel monumental in scale. In *Encompassing* (2014), we are lulled by the shallow recession of an endless ocean in translucent shades of titanium and aquamarine, the rhythmic rolls of its massive waves and crests, even as we





Leigh Wen, *The Milky Way*, 2019. Oil on linen, 60 in. diameter.

are caught in a frenetic zigzag of tangled lines. Beyond, the golden haze of a cloud-filled sky at dusk dissolves into a blurred horizon. Gone is any perception of spatial distance in the tondo *Fire X* (2012), one of a series she made after returning to Taiwan in 1997 and was moved by the ceremonial pyres of her father's funeral. We are thrust into an inferno of burning planks and raging flames. The air is clogged and hot. Engraved lines dart in all directions from fiery, yellow-orange swirls. But glimpses of a cerulean sky convey release, the possibility of rebirth and reunification with the eternal Void.

The serene *Mid-Summer Morning Glim* (2019) features a bird's eye panorama of a wooded mountain range and valley nestling a lake. In this turquoise and emerald arcadia, we are bathed in bright light and realistic detail and can easily imagine the fresh scent of clean air. By contrast, in the tondo *The Milky Way* (2019), we are floating in an Escheresque cosmic space where tiny white birds seem to fly in and out of a dark starry sky. White ginger blossoms, a cherished perennial in Taiwan which Wen deems autobiographical, hover above and join in her search for grounding. More birds—each



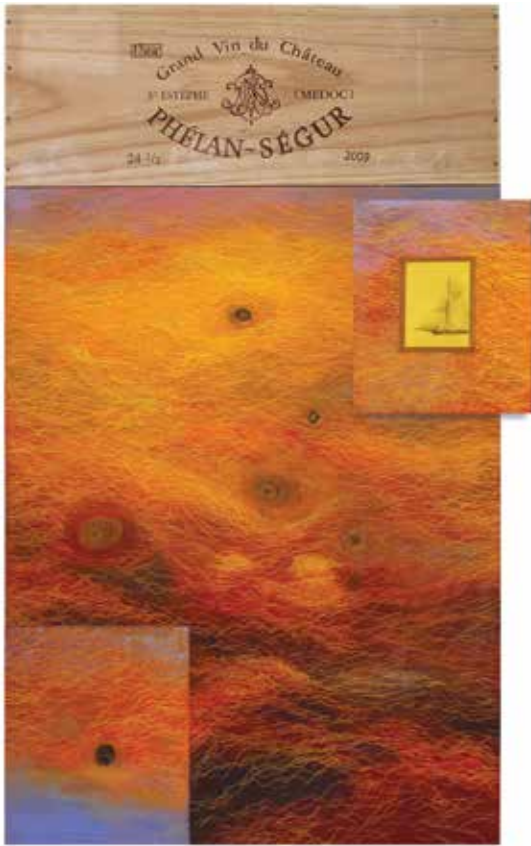
Leigh Wen, *Side Track 54*, 2016. Mixed Media, 26 1/5 x 33 in.

its own shaped canvas—soar from the center like free-spirited messengers. They also recall the yearly bridge that magpies build to reunite two famous lovers in Chinese folklore, who had been banished to the heavens as stars. Colors come intuitively from Wen's heart. A coded impression of a particular mood or feeling, they draw in part from Chinese cultural values and natural phenomena. Blue, for example, signals health, prosperity, and harmony, red symbolizes good fortune and joy, while yellow, deemed the most prestigious, represents earth, as well as freedom from worldly cares.

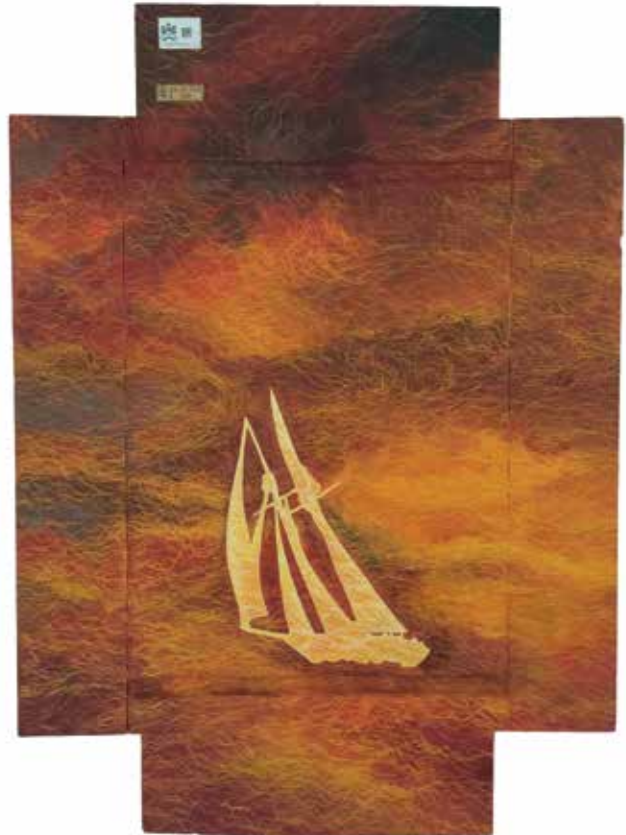
Nothing is accidental in Wen's process. She starts by laying down a ground on a stretched

linen or wooden support and slowly adds layers of oil washes, carefully adjusting the color transitions and chiaroscuro to suggest diurnal and seasonal cycles. Textures and sharpness are equally important in controlling tactility and depth and creating subtle variations. The lines come last. And once applied, they are irreversible. Wen likens these marks to waves and credits her skill to her family's trade. Entering a flow state, she excavates the painted surface with a stylus or another pointed tool until it meets the ground and traces grooves all the way to the edges, releasing skeins of repeated lines. Like the fine facial wrinkles that map a life's journey, her linear networks can evoke a musical





Leigh Wen, *Side Track 58*, 2016. Mixed Media, 37 1/5 x 37 1/5 in.



Leigh Wen, *Side Track 49*, 2016. Mixed Media, 29 x 21 in.

score, a nervous system, or perhaps, a beating heart. Their presence creates a palpable, psychic tension. With slow and close looking, however, more and more details emerge. Shifts in the lines' thickness and density harmonize with the build-up of luminous paint. We witness inner moods becoming outer places as the personal and the shared converge. Soon, a feeling of connectivity takes over, a sense of release and unfettered power that induces wonder and contemplation of the sublime.

During this period, Wen grew increasingly aware of how climate change was endangering the survival of the planet and in 2015, she embarked on a series of mixed media

works, which she titled *Side Tracks*, to address obliquely our negative imprint on the natural world. Ranging in source from early twentieth century collages and readymades to Robert Rauschenberg's post-war combines, these assemblages of wooden wine crates and other recycled materials afforded Wen a new way to approach structure and content. In *Side Track 54* (2016), verdant green panels bearing shipping insignia project in cardinal directions from an aqua center. The branded side of a wine crate forms the north panel of the sunset-hued *Side Track 58* (2016), while another crate fragment in the upper right is inked with the outline of a schooner. A lone, ghostly vessel appears in



Leigh Wen, *Lady Slipper 8*, 2020. Oil on linen, 46 1/5 x 30 1/5 in.





Leigh Wen, *Water, Fire, Earth, Air* (clockwise from top left), 2016. Fabric, 25 x 68 x 13 in. each.

several other works, including *Side Track 49* (2016), where it leans into a choppy sea against a sky of smoldering oranges and frenzied lines. This image of freedom reminds Wen of the maritime settings of former galleries, becoming a surrogate for her and by extension the viewers, as it races into a perilous unknown.

In 2013, when she went back to Taiwan, Wen relocated her home and studio in the Yangming Mountain region of Taipei. Being out in nature and cultivating a garden spurred a series of oversized flower paintings that dazzle in the

meticulous articulation of their anatomy. Bright and dramatic, each portrait is a close-up whose shaped canvas echoes its anatomical contour. A nod to the hard-edge geometry of Frank Stella's shaped canvases, Wen's organic designs bring alive the bountiful lyricism of her subjects. Many present variations of the lady slipper, a Chinese symbol of unwavering love and a personal favorite of Wen's. In *Taiwanese Lady Slipper 8* (2020), a medley of purples and reds counterpointed by a flourish of fanning lines accentuates the orchid's sensual pouch, its petals, and

reproductive organs. These blossom paintings, however, are much more than botanical studies. For Wen, they personify feminine beauty. In addition to a similar life cycle, their vanitas depictions in many cultures evoke transience and desire as portrayals of women often do. The works also suggest the strength of women in a predominantly male world and celebrate Georgia O'Keefe, Louise Bourgeois, and other feminist trailblazers.

Over the years, the physical environment has inspired other series whose goal is bringing utilitarian objects into the world of fine art and amplifying the richness of the everyday. In the four-part *Earth, Water, Fire, and Wind* (2016), Wen boldly reimagines the elements as satin evening gowns in elegant sheens of green, blue, orange, and purple. Made collaboratively with Taiwan's fashion industry, the garments convey both the majesty of essential power and the contours of the female body: fitted passages alternate with graceful folds melding the ethereal and the abstract into something that can be worn. Flowers show up in a recent line of sofa tables, including *Peony 22* (2021), where commercially sourced steel becomes the leg and polished surface for a crimson peony blossom, a Chinese sign of good fortune. And the artist's

series of ceramic vessels harkens back to her artistic origin. In *The Water Cylinder* (2009) five stacked bands rendered in thin washes and modulated finishes reach an impressive height of seven feet. Like a scroll painting in the round, the action unfolds from a dark sandy seafloor. After rising through windswept waves and a coral reef, the swells gently fuse ambient reflections with the soft pastel oranges and yellows of dawn.

Throughout her prolific career, Wen has sought new ways to animate nature's hidden forces into layered and nuanced expression and inspire better stewardship for our planet. Each time she folds a personal memory into cultural history, she redefines herself and enlarges her worldview. A Taiwanese American with roots in both traditions, she shows us in *At One with the Elements* that home can be multi-sited while staying grounded in the heart. With special focus on thresholds and transitions, her visual poetry reconciles formal and metaphoric opposites in transcendent balance and creates places where our being is at once centered and expanded. As we revel in her holistic vision, we experience how a naturalistic scene from afar exposes a deep, rhythmic vitality close up. Yet a profound mystery remains and beckons forward.





Leigh Wen, *The Water Cylinder (A, B, C, D, E)*, 2009.  
Porcelain, 70 4/5 x 14 in.



Leigh Wen, *Amaryllis II*, 2014. Oil on linen, 75 1/2 x 74 2/5 in.



Leigh Wen, *Clematis IV*, 2020. Oil on linen, 60 3/5 x 57 4/5 in.





Leigh Wen, *Iris IV*, 2016. Oil on linen, 61 x 65 3/4 in.



Leigh Wen, *Iris VI*, 2020. Oil on linen, 64 x 69 2/5 in.



Leigh Wen, *Taiwanese Lady Slipper 1*, 2015. Oil on linen, 66 x 47 1/5 in.



Leigh Wen, *Taiwanese Lady Slipper 3*, 2015. Oil on linen, 55 x 46 2/5 in.



Leigh Wen, *Taiwanese Lady Slipper 4*, 2016. Oil on linen, 45 1/5 x 47 1/5 in.





Leigh Wen, *Pansy IV*, 2014. Oil on linen, 60 x 60 in.



Leigh Wen, *Sunflower III*, 2016. Oil on linen, 70 4/5 x 72 2/5 in.



Leigh Wen, *Peony 22 Sofa Table edition 4/10*, 2021. Stainless steel, 23 x 21 1/5 x 21 1/5 in.



Leigh Wen, *Ginger Lilies IV*, 2018. Oil on linen, 19 3/5 x 25 1/2 in.





Leigh Wen, *Iceberg I*, 2019. Oil on linen, 71 3/5 in x 132 in.



Leigh Wen, *Earth, Sea, and Echoes II*, 2006. Porcelain, 10 1/5 x 10 1/5 x 11 2/5 in.



Leigh Wen, *Misty Shore*, 2006. Porcelain, 15 1/5 x 6 3/5 x 17 1/5 in.



Leigh Wen, *Moment*, 2015. Oil on linen, 51 x 63 3/4 in.





Leigh Wen, *Mount Nanhu*, 2015. Oil on linen, 57 1/5 x 43 4/5 in.





Leigh Wen, *Mt. S 13*, 2018. Pure silver, oil paint, and red clay, 25 1/2 x 35 4/5 in.



Leigh Wen, *Mt. S 14*, 2018. Pure silver, oil paint, and red clay, 25 1/2 x 35 4/5 in.



Leigh Wen, *Side Track 31*, 2016. Mixed Media, 32 2/5 x 25 3/4 in.



Leigh Wen, *Side Track 38*, 2016. Mixed media, 26 2/5 x 33 1/5 in.





Leigh Wen, *Side Track 40*, 2016. Mixed Media, 34 1/5 x 26 3/4 in.



Leigh Wen, *Side Track 67*, 2021. Mixed Media, 20 4/5 x 39 3/4 in.

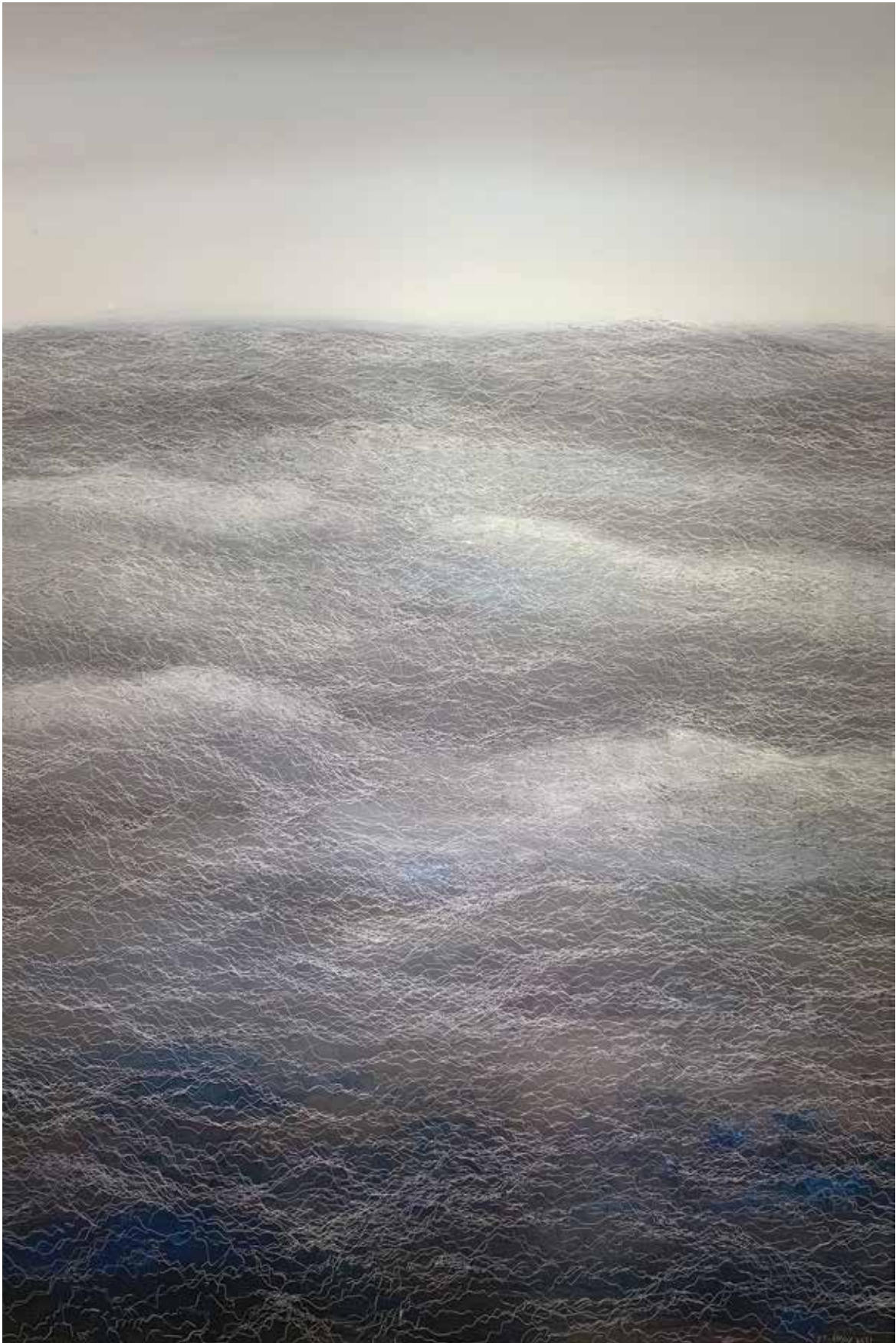


Leigh Wen, *The Twin Peaks*, 2014. Oil on linen, 94 2/5 x 129 7/8 in.



Leigh Wen, *Olana 8*, 2021. Oil on linen, 63 3/4 x 89 2/5 in.





Leigh Wen, *Untitled*, 2021. Oil on linen, 63 3/4 x 57 1/5 in.





Leigh Wen, *Waterfall V*, 2017. Oil on linen, 63 3/4 x 51 in.





Leigh Wen, *Whirling Ocean I*, 2006. Porcelain, 15 2/5 x 10 1/5 x 26 3/4 in.





Leigh Wen, *Whirling Ocean II*, 2006. Porcelain, 14 x 11 4/5 x 26 3/4 in.

## CHECKLIST

1. *Amaryllis II*, 2014. Oil on linen, 75 1/2 x 74 2/5 in.
2. *Clematis IV*, 2020. Oil on linen, 60 3/5 x 57 4/5 in.
3. *Earth, Sea, and Echoes II*, 2006. Porcelain, 10 1/5 x 10 1/5 x 11 2/5 in.
4. *Encompassing I*, 2014. Oil on canvas, 57 x 89 in.
5. *Fire X*, 2012. Oil on linen, 59 4/5 in diameter.
6. *Ginger Lilies IV*, 2018. Oil on linen, 19 3/5 x 25 1/2 in.
7. *Iceberg I*, 2019. Oil on linen, 71 3/5 in x 132 in.
8. *Iris IV*, 2016. Oil on linen, 61 in x 65 3/4 in.
9. *Iris VI*, 2020. Oil on linen, 64 x 69 2/5 in.
10. *Lady Slipper 8*, 2020. Oil on linen, 46 1/5 x 30 1/5 in.
11. *Mid Summer Morning Glim V*, 2019. Oil on linen, 78 3/4 x 131 4/5 in.
12. *Misty Shore*, 2006. Porcelain, 15 1/5 x 6 3/5 x 17 1/5 in.
13. *Moment*, 2015. Oil on linen, 51 x 63 3/4 in.
14. *Mount Nanhu*, 2015. Oil on linen, 57 1/5 x 43 4/5 in.
15. *Mt. S 13*, 2018. Pure silver, oil paint, and red clay, 25 1/2 x 35 4/5 in.
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17. *Olana 8*, 2021. Oil on linen, 63 3/4 x 89 2/5 in.
18. *Pansy IV*, 2014. Oil on linen, 60 x 60 in.
19. *Peony 22*, 2020. Oil on linen, 69 1/5 x 64 in.
20. *Peony 22 Sofa Table edition 4/10*, 2021. Stainless steel, 23 x 21 1/5 x 21 1/5 in.
21. *Side Track 31*, 2016. Mixed media, 32 2/5 x 25 3/4 in.
22. *Side Track 38*, 2016. Mixed media, 26 2/5 x 33 1/5 in.
23. *Side Track 40*, 2016. Mixed media, 34 1/5 x 26 3/4 in.
24. *Side Track 49*, 2016. Mixed media, 29 x 21 in.
25. *Side Track 54*, 2016. Mixed media, 26 1/5 x 33 in.
26. *Side Track 58*, 2016. Mixed media, 37 1/5 x 37 1/5 in.
27. *Side Track 67*, 2021. Mixed media, 20 4/5 x 39 3/4 in.
28. *Sunflower III*, 2016. Oil on linen, 70 4/5 x 72 2/5 in.
29. *Taiwanese Lady Slipper - 1*, 2015. Oil on linen, 66 x 47 1/5 in.
30. *Taiwanese Lady Slipper - 3*, 2015. Oil on linen, 55 x 46 2/5 in.
31. *Taiwanese Lady Slipper - 4*, 2016. Oil on linen, 45 1/5 x 47 1/5 in.
32. *The Milky Way*, 2019. Oil on linen, 60 in diameter.
33. *The Twin Peaks*, 2014. Oil on linen, 94 2/5 x 129 7/8 in.
34. *The Water Cylinder (A, B, C, D, and E)*, 2009. Porcelain, 70 4/5 x 14 in.
35. *Untitled*, 2021. Oil on linen, 63 3/4 x 57 1/5 in.
36. *Water, Fire, Earth, Air*, 2016. Fabric, 25 x 68 x 13 in. each.
37. *Waterfall V*, 2017. Oil on linen, 63 3/4 x 51 in.
38. *Whirling Ocean I*, 2006. Porcelain, 15 2/5 x 10 1/5 x 26 3/4 in.
39. *Whirling Ocean II*, 2006. Porcelain, 14 x 11 4/5 x 26 3/4 in.

## SARAH TANGUY BIOGRAPHY

Sarah Tanguy is an independent curator and arts writer based in Washington, DC. The daughter of a U.S. diplomat, she holds a BA in Fine Arts from Georgetown University and an MA in Art History from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. After interning at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Tanguy worked at the National Gallery, the International Exhibitions Foundation, the Tremaine Collection, the International Sculpture Center, the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, the Hechinger Collection, and the Office of Art in Embassies, U.S. Department of State, where she curated temporary exhibitions and permanent collections for U.S. diplomatic facilities overseas.

A strong believer in hands-on collaboration and the power of art to connect with our lived experience, Tanguy enjoys participating in public art projects and exploring the intersection of art with such topics as food, tools, books, and science. Recent exhibitions include *Reveal: The Art of Reimagining Scientific Discovery* and *Twist-Layer-Pour*, both at the American University Museum, and *TRACES* at The Kreeger Museum. A frequent lecturer, panelist, and juror, Tanguy delights in being a visiting critic and engaging one on one with students. In addition to catalogue essays, she contributes to *Sculpture* and *Metalsmith* among other publications. Since 2020, she has served on the board of the Frauke and Willem de Looper Foundation.



## ARTIST STATEMENT

I am often awestruck by the power of the creator and am influenced by Eastern philosophies that pay respect to nature. I feel that humans are small in the face of nature, and one must learn to be selfless, compassionate, and giving.

My paintings express my personal and cultural histories. Having grown up on the island of Taiwan, and living now in America, I feel the ebb and flow of competing cultures. The ancient philosophies of my homeland, which teach self-discipline and selflessness, collide and mingle with Western notions of ego, alienation, and desire.

My working method is a process of subtraction from darkness to light. I carve into the paint with a stylus to bring forth the individual lines that are the central motif of my work. These lines flow across the canvas in rhythms and frequencies that create depths and swells on the painted surface. Something of the self is lost in the resulting tangle, and then regained, only to be lost again. Simplicity and harmony exist within the chaos.

Leigh Wen, *Iris IV* (detail), 2016. Oil on linen, 61 x 65 3/4 in.





## LEIGH WEN BIOGRAPHY

Born in Taipei, Taiwan, Leigh Wen is a Taiwanese American artist who currently resides in New York City. After earning a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from Washington State University (1984), she received a Master of Fine Arts degree from the State University of New York at Albany (1994). Wen's many awards and fellowships include two New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowships, a Helena Rubinstein Fellowship, two Artist Grants from the Pollock-Krasner Foundation, and the Lorenzo de Medici Award in Florence Biennale.

Well versed in printmaking, metal engraving, fiberglass, and ceramics, Wen is best known for her oil paintings whose intricate linear incisions recall the scored and scratched surfaces of the engraved plate. Over the course of her prolific career, she has explored the four elements of Western cosmology and our fragile ecology as her primary themes through immersive landscapes and mixed media assemblages. In 2013, she added oversized flower portraits to celebrate feminine power and most recently she has created collaborative artworks with commercial designers.

Since 1980, Wen has participated in numerous museum and gallery exhibitions including MoCA Taipei (2016) and the Albany Institute of History and Art (2022). She is also an active contributor to shows and collections at U.S. diplomatic missions around the globe through the U.S. Department of State. Her work can be found in many other prestigious public and private collections and has been featured in *Art in America*, *New American Paintings*, *Art in Asia*, *Vogue*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Harp-er's Bazaar*, and *Garden and Interior*.

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