

Being Poetic Ruins Life Audio Descriptions transcript

The Weston Gallery

My History, 2008

Coming down the stairs from the reception, we move into the basement galleries. Facing us on the wall is a handscroll, titled *My History*, made by Evelyn Taocheng Wang in 2008. It is 560cm long and framed in a dark wood. The narrative scroll reads from right to left with images painted in muted colours and fine black lines. The artist has used a fine brush technique onto paper, browned with tea. The images are interspersed with blocks of calligraphy written in Chinese and English, alongside Wang's own red seals which are stamped throughout.

The first section shows Wang punting on the River Cam behind King's College, Cambridge, a steaming hot pot in front of her in the boat. To the left is a block of text in which the narrator is telling a Mr Bingley character a story about a beautiful woman and her love life, beginning "Mr Bingley, why don't you have a rest enjoying more food?" A hot plate of food is drawn beneath this text.

The second section of the handscroll shows a soldier figure standing forlorn and alone amongst an orchard of white blossom. To the left of this is a letter written from "T" to "W" about their life in London, signing off "From. T. Spring, London, 1939." The third section of the scroll features a monochrome block painted in blue-green pigment that stretches from top to bottom of the scroll for a stretch of around 30 cm.

The final part of the scroll shows an imagined scene from Andy Warhol's 1989 solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In the background we can see a depiction of Warhol's portrait of Chairman Mao. In the front of the image, we see a haloed figure of Wang figure talking to a cowboy. The cowboy, as detailed in the accompanying block of text on the left, is asking Wang (now an old lady) for money.

This handscroll titled is one of the first works in which Wang details an entire narrative in small, neat calligraphy, accompanied by painted images, inscriptions and seals on ripe Xuan paper, considered the

best surface for Chinese calligraphy and painting. This paper is prized for its exceptional ink absorption and durability.

This work also introduces Wang's seal, which we see throughout her paintings. This is borrowed from the literati tradition, elements of which she recreates in her work, such as in the careful placement of inscriptions and empty space. In this work, she uses two versions of her seal, the first is a square relief seal in standard Chinese script with a transcription of Wang's name in Roman script below. Wang used this seal until 2017, it is an imitation of cheap bureaucratic seals, inspired by Japanese commercial posters. The second seal used in this scroll is an image of a turtle with the word "MOVE" written below. It is the earliest and most frequently used of Wang's seals. The turtle motif is a self-portrait of Wang's and refers to the time it takes to read her handscrolls.

This handscroll collates references to culture and art history, from Jane Austen novels and Merchant Ivory films, to *shanshui* and James Tissot paintings. It introduces imagined fragments of different cultures, as Wang moves between different positionalities of East and West, as we see throughout the work in the rest of the exhibition.

For example, the first section of the scroll is inspired by a scene taken from James Ivory's 1987 "British heritage cinema" film *Maurice*, based on E. M. Forster's novel of the same name written in 1913-14. Forster's novel was published posthumously in 1971 after the decriminalisation of male homosexual acts in England and Wales in 1967. The choice of this reference feeds into Wang's broader interest in queering narrative and artistic traditions. The cowboy in the final part of the scroll is inspired by a scene from John Schlesinger's 1969 film *Midnight Cowboy* that Wang reinterprets in a similarly queering method.

The officer figure in the second part of the scroll is based on a character in Roman Polanski's World War II film, *The Pianist*, from 2002. In Wang's narrative, her character leaves this figure for Mr Bingley, who she is writing to in the first section. The Officer stands in a pastoral scene from the James Tissot painting, *Spring*, from 1865, with an orchard of trees with white blossoms.

The green-blue colour block of the third section acts as a kind of visual pause in the composition. The pigments are made of the minerals Malachite and Azurite, ingredients that were believed to grant immortality to those who took them as an elixir in ancient China. In the Chinese *shanshui* painting tradition, these pigments were also used for their spiritual significance: painters drew on their transcendent associations, using them to paint colour into rocks, trees, moss, and mountains, when a retreat into the natural world was understood as a spiritual act. This section is inspired by the arrangement of colour in Rothko's paintings, according to Wang, who sees his paintings as resembling the organisation of pigments in eyeshadow palettes.

The style of painting used throughout this work is inspired by the Ming dynasty painter, Qiu Ying (1494-1552), who was known for his mastery over the *gongbi* painting technique. This technique involves fine-line brushwork, where the brush hairs of the paintbrush are tied into a fine point. In fusing the pigments of *shanshui* painting with the techniques of *gongbi* painting and the seals and inscriptions of literati painting, Wang succeeds in queering traditional Chinese art systems and histories. She deconstructs the inherent hierarchies of these traditions and elegantly folds them into her own invented and fragmented stories.

Spreading Elegance, 2019

Turning to the left we see eight tabletop vitrines in a pale wood scattered across the gallery in a café-like arrangement. This installation by Evelyn Taocheng Wang, is titled *Spreading Elegance*, from 2019. Each documents a single exchange between Wang and a friend, including a letter about elegance, received in return for an agnès b. garment from the artist's wardrobe.

Each vitrine is covered in a glass overlay containing a small, archive-like display of letters, photographs, rice paper drawings and other paraphernalia. A table lamp is placed on every table, with a white folded top and slim, black stand and a matching square stool sits beneath.

For the purpose of this audio guide, I will describe two of these tables in detail to give a sense of the installation as a whole.

Within one of the vitrines we see in the top left an open, brown envelope, slightly smaller than an A4 piece of paper, placed sideways. In the bottom left we see a handwritten letter, written in neat, curvy handwriting on paper decorated with small, purple hand-pressed flowers.

In the top right of the vitrine, placed inside of a recess about three centimetres deep, is a drawing by Wang. The drawing, edged with a black tartan cotton, is of a pale blue dress with a white floral pattern and tie belt around its waist. It is drawn using light washes of ink and outlined with a black, fine line. To the right of the dress Wang has drawn the head of a refined woman wearing a fancy hat. Thick black and white acrylic paint is messily painted around these two drawings. In the bottom left-hand corner of the drawing Wang has signed E. T. Wang, 2019, Rotti. This is written beneath one of her signature seals, stamped in red, of a turtle with the word "move" in capital letters underneath.

In the bottom right-hand corner of the vitrine is a photograph of the same dress as in the drawing, hanging on a wooden structure.

This exchange is with Wang's friend Mila Lanfermeijer, also an artist. In her letter, Lanfermeijer writes,

"What is elegance?

When an elegant woman cries she would show emotion, preferably in a few single tears. They would run down her cheek but there would be no whaling, no muscles moving, and not too many external signs of pain."

In the concluding paragraph of the letter she writes,

"I think my ambiguous relation to the concept of elegance comes from my perception that to be elegant means to be

trapped in the gaze of someone else, even more than we already are."

In another vitrine, in the top right corner, Wang has placed a photograph of a colourful, abstract patterned women's shirt. The pattern looks like lots of tiny fragments of colours: pink, blue, yellow and white. The image shows it hanging on a wooden structure in a room that looks like a studio with a desk and chair behind the garment. Beneath the photograph is another handwritten letter, this time from a friend called Johannes. The letter is written on four pieces of roughly A5 sized, white paper placed side by side. The handwriting is jerky and sprawling with some words written larger than others and highlighted in orange. Johannes has signed their name in a thick navy-coloured ink pen. Beneath the letter in the bottom right corner, is a white paper that looks like it might have been an envelope with the name EVELYN scrawled in capital letters in the same thick navy pen.

On the left-hand side of the vitrine, placed inside a recess about one inch deep and measuring roughly 30 by 35 centimetres, is an ink drawing of the same shirt as we see in the photograph. It is pictured blowing slightly open and inside it is a white, leafy flower in bloom. Next to the shirt, a girl is drawn dancing with a skeleton. Both drawings are in muted colours and outlined with fine, black lines. A messy purple shape is painted in thick acrylic in the bottom right corner of the drawing. Two of Wang's signature red seals are placed on the bottom left and mid-right side of the drawing. The drawing is on a pale, inky pink background and framed by a border of dark purple cotton, except for a pale pink cotton on the left border.

Between the drawing and the photograph, in the centre top of the vitrine, is a deeper recess around five centimetres deep and measuring roughly 15 centimetres across and ten centimetres down. It holds a small terracotta ceramic, glazed in black. The ceramic is of a horse's head, which the letter writer references in their letter,

"I'm really happy to receive something my friend told me I have a total lack of. As a trade I give you a ceramic horse I made in Mexico for you. Horses are really elegant that I know."

In 2018 Wang offered her wardrobe of French designer agnès b. clothing in exchange for a handwritten letter about the term, "elegance". Wang was a particular fan of agnès b. clothing since for her, like for many women in China, the brand represented a classy, European femininity. Upon receiving a grant from the Dutch funding body, Mondriaan Fonds, she bought a new wardrobe of agnès b. garments, so that she might appear like a proper, serious artist at exhibition openings.

In total Wang gave away 21 garments as part of this exchange. She dedicates one tabletop vitrine to each exchange, filling each with a photograph of the garment, the letter received, and her own drawing of the garment. In *Spreading Elegance*, she wanted to create a space that felt somewhat between a fashion concept store and a library. This intimate installation of epistolary exchange layers garments and texts, which, together, form an image of elegance, rather than mere descriptions of clothing.

Clerestory Gallery

Sunny England and Rainy France, 2026

Coming into the Clerestory gallery, straight ahead of us are two large, square paintings, measuring two meters by two meters. The painting on the right is titled *Sunny England and Rainy France*, made by Evelyn Taocheng Wang this year in 2026.

This painting is formed of abstract colours with a set of elegant windows emerging from the bottom part of the painting. The windows are tall, multi-pane sash windows, typical of Regency-era London townhouses. Each window is divided into a grid of small rectangular planes and opens onto a small wrought-iron balustrade.

These windows emerge from a canvas covered largely in shades of a light blue and pale green oil paint. The top half is made up of tiny

marks of blue paint, not dissimilar to those used in pointillist painting. Halfway down the painting these blue marks morph in a shade of green before the pointillist marks become larger brushstrokes of slightly differing tones of pale, muted green at the very bottom.

Before the change from the blue to green hues, some areas of pink pointillist marks interrupt the blue in the middle axis of the painting. By the left edge of the painting, in the top, blue section, is a swirling brushstroke of paint made up of different blue tones.

The Xuan paper which obscures the image is an offset rectangle of around 1.5m x 50cm. Across it, in watered down calligraphy ink, is written,

"because the characters for "England" made me think of little red houses underneath a blue

sky,

while "France" was a blue-green shade of drizzle, like the porcelain tiles in the bathroom, redolent of the aroma of shampoo"

The window furthest to the right is partially obscured by a small block of hand painted text. It reads,

"This text, "because the..... of shampoo." is from Eileen Chang eassay "Whispers" (1944), in paragraph that she reminisces about her childhood Shanghai home interior's colour-combination of red-blue associating Chinese character of "England" 英格蘭 with weather wrongly. This text continues as "My mother told me later that England was dreary and rainy and that France was sunny and bright, but I have always been completely unable to revise these first impressions." Above this window on the right is a smaller block of text that reads, "I must say that your imagery-interpretation here is still more 'France' than 'England'" "I see... .. romantic, poetry, sentimental, deeply quietly touches; those kind of shit."

The windows in this painting are drawn from a building around the corner from a Margaret Howell store in Bloomsbury, London.

Following on from her obsession with French designer agnès b.'s clothing, Wang turned her eye to the garments of British designer Margaret Howell. Howell's clothing is known for being understated, functional and timeless.

The black rectangle of Xuan paper on which the large, central text is transcribed, is considered the best paper for Chinese calligraphy and painting. It is prized for its ink absorption and durability. There is a direct relationship between the text written on the Xuan paper and Evelyn's smaller notes in the block of text in the right of the painting.

Chinese-American writer Eileen Chang emerges as another significant presence and is here directly quoted in the work *Sunny England and Rainy France* (2026). Chang was a prolific writer whose protagonists were often coldly elegant women, and whose prose focussed almost obsessively on details of dress. Chang was herself as melancholic a figure as her protagonists, fleeing China when her books were deemed anti-Revolutionary, to settle in California, where she eventually died in obscurity. Chang's idealised—and often mistaken—perceptions of Britain, together with her desolate and lonely femininity, experience of migration and cultural displacement, resonate deeply with Wang's practice. As do her romantic sensibility and influence on canonical English writer W. Somerset Maugham; again, complicating narratives of purity of cultural production.

Daskalopoulos Tank Gallery

Alice and Eyeshadow [Alice in Wonderland series], 2022

Walking into the Daskalopoulos Tank Gallery, immediately on our right we see a 2022 painting by Evelyn Taocheng Wang, titled *Alice and Eyeshadow* from her "Alice in Wonderland" series. Measuring 113.5cm high by 93.5cm across, the work on paper is float mounted within an elegant, minimalist dark wood frame.

The painting is busy with marks in ink, acrylic, mineral colour, tea water, red, wine, colour pencil and the artist's seals. In the centre of the painting is a makeup palette with eye shadows in magenta, purple and orange. To the left of the makeup palette is a large

heart symbol painted in a dark pink with an orange border. Two pale yellow circles in thick acrylic paint are placed on the edge of the lower half of the heart. The pink portion of the painted heart is filled with lots of tiny dark pink dots, in the style of Western pointillism or the "dian" of Chinese shan shui painting, but without any shading. Filling the space around the heart and eyeshadow palette, and across the lower left corner of the work are lots of dry brushed marks in a muted black ink. The marks are small and painted vertically, achieving a textured look. These marks are not dissimilar to those used in depicting shadows and depth in Xie Yi (or Chinese Freestyle) painting.

In the top left of the work, a small block of text written in black calligraphy reads,

"Alice said to the Queen of Hearts:

"Who cares for you?"

and the Queen of Hearts is a fury, said:

"Behead Alice!"

At this moment, Alice had grown to her full size and she said:

"You're nothing but a pack of cards!"

Then Alice woke up, it was a dream."

Across the top left corner and the top section of the painting is a mix of brushstrokes: wide strokes of a watery muted green and smaller marks of bright pink acrylic hues. In the gaps between these marks are tiny black dots. Beneath the stretches of pink and green wash and acrylic is a small painting of what seems to be an ornate case of blusher and its brush. The pink powder is encased in a textured, pale green box with a scalloped edge.

In the bottom right corner of the painting is an ink painting in the style of traditional Chinese shan shui landscape painting. Painted in washes of black ink and fine lines it shows rocky landscapes connected by a wooden bridge. This section of the painting sits on top of blue-green watery marks, like a river beneath the mountains. Another pink heart with an orange border, smaller this time, is painted within this river.

The block of text in *Alice and Eyeshadow* is a paraphrase of a quote from *Alice in Wonderland* and contains some grammatical mistakes: "in a fury" becomes "is a fury". This misunderstanding connects to a key tenet of Wang's work which purposefully includes language errors, underlining her status as an immigrant, and asking the question, who gets to be poetic? This work is taken from Wang's "Alice in Wonderland" series, in which Evelyn uses the Lewis Carroll world to explore different psychological states and constructions of identity.

The eyeshadow palette is also a motif that appears across Wang's work, as she describes her work as an "eyeshadow palette of art history". In other works, we see references to Mark Rothko paintings, which Wang likens to eye shadow palettes also.

The dotting technique that we see in this painting, is typical of traditional Chinese painting. These deliberate brushstrokes were often used in shan shui paintings to build depth in the composition and balance out sweeps of light ink wash. The connection with the Western pointillism technique underlines another instance of Wang layering Western and Chinese painting vocabularies on top of one another.

Bridget Riley Gallery

The Wrong Chinaman in The Remains of the Day (1989) on the Wrongly Imitated Agnes Martin's Garden, 2026

In the Bridget Riley Gallery, a large white cube space which is top lit by window, a free-standing wall constructed of a wood frame and stretched muslin dominates the space. On it hangs a painting titled, *The Wrong Chinaman in The Remains of the Day (1989) on the Wrongly Imitated Agnes Martin's Garden*. It was made in 2026 for the exhibition at CCA. The painting is a large square format, 185 x 185cm, so that standing in front of it means you are enveloped by the image. The canvas is crossed by fine red and green lines creating a grid of small rectangles. They are doubled, so that green runs with red at 5mm distance, before a gap of around 10cm horizontally, and a height of 20cm. They look like they have been made with a coloured

pencil. On closer inspection, the grid is not as perfect as it first appears. Some lines bend toward each other, others have become one line or have a wider gap.

There is some calligraphic black writing in the left-hand corner, written in ink. It reads

'This painting is a wrong imitation of Angès Martin's painting "Garden", 1964. Her original work set the green vertical line at the right side. The red line horizontally is above the green line. Synthetic polymer paint, color pencil on canvas. 183x183cm. This painting inspired by Japanese writers Kazuo Ihiguro's British novel "The Remains of the Day" 1989; and a same title film by James Ivory in 1993.'

Japanese symbols appear after the title and name of the author. On the right of this text is a red seal or stamp, with a turtle symbol and the letters MIV. Beneath this are the words Evelyn T. Wang 2026. In the top right-hand corner is another text, written in the same style as the first, It states:

Miss Kenton: "Look at it! Is that or is it not the wrong chinaman?"
Stevens: "Miss Kenton, I'm very busy. I am suprised that you have noting better to do than stand ariund all day...."

Miss Kenton "Mr Stevens, look at that chinaman and tell me the truth!"

Stevens: Mis Kenton. I would ask you to keep you voice down. What would the other servants thing to hear us shouting at the top of our voices about....chinaman?"

Miss Kenton "And I would ask you, Mr Stevens, to tourn around and look at the chinaman.'

In the bottom right-hand side is a porcelain figure, about a quarter of the sizes of the canvas. It is robed and looking to the left of the frame. The robe swirls with reds and purples, and drapes over the figure, with large sleeves and a long skirt. One hand protrudes from a sleeve. It wears a white headband and has neatly tied up hair.

The face is pale, with red lips and a calm expression. It stands on a base that resembles a stone.

The text in the painting quotes a passage in the novel *Remains of the Day* (1989), in which the valet, Mr Stevens is accused by Miss Kenton of having placed a porcelain figure in the wrong place which is interpreted as evidence of his waning efficacy as a servant. The novel, written by Japanese writer Kazuro Ishiguro, makes the British class system its focus, examining the reserve, prejudice, and hierarchies that underwrote a vanishing way of life. Repeating the refrain 'the wrong chinaman' also introduces the concept of identity, cultural projections, and racialised clichés that function in Western cultures towards China and other countries. Chinese figurines were very popular in the UK in the late Victorian era; a moment in consumer culture called 'Chinamania'. These items would be displayed as a sign of good taste and affluence. Wealthier households would purchase original imports from China, whilst lower income ones could purchase ones made in British factories. The work thus introduces ideas of fakes and copies, authenticity and cultural appropriation, and social status. This is further complicated by these motifs being placed on top of a 'wrong' imitation of Agnes Martin, a western modernist artist, who herself adopted Eastern forms of thought such as Zen Buddhism. There are also grammatical errors in the text, that underline that this is a quotation made by a non-native English speaker, perhaps with a sense of being 'wrong' in the English-speaking culture in which they find themselves.