

Some Notes and Thoughts on the Shiodome Project

When Sarina Tang first approached me about the prospect of making large murals in Tokyo, I was enormously excited. But I also realized that the murals could not just hang on the walls like ordinary paintings. Looking at the computer renderings of the interior, I began to visualize the kind of effect I wanted—something more integral, more seamlessly connected to the architecture. I asked the architects, Roche Dinkeloo and Associates, if they could set the murals flush with the granite walls. Luckily, since the building was still in an early stage of construction, they agreed. I made a preliminary sketch, using watercolors and oil paintings scanned into the computer, and then ordered the panels—more than forty of them, of honeycombed aluminum with canvas glued to the surfaces, prepared for oil painting.

I often work big, but the unusual scale of these paintings posed special challenges. Technically, for instance, I had to work on the floor, using specially made adjustable long-handled brushes. The scale itself altered my brushstrokes, making each single shape more independent, sometimes more graphic. I had to continually adjust, trying to envision a total image that I myself could not yet see. The most basic challenge was to make the images work for viewers from all different vantages.

When I'm painting, I work intuitively, physically, thinking about brushwork as a kind of choreography, a dance that happens in the wrists and arms, as well as the whole body. Because my process is improvisational, the circumstances are important. Skowhegan Blue Floating World was painted mostly in the summertime, in Maine. The studio was in a remote, wooded area, on a lake, and that setting became part of the work's inspiration. The second mural, Woodward Looking East, was painted entirely in Queens, New York, not too far from where I grew up.

Some other visual memories helped shape these murals. One is my lifelong study of Japanese Ukiyo-e woodblock prints. The prints' subjects—youth, beauty, theatre, and the seasons of love—are transient, "floating", and always changing. At the same time, to a Western eye, their pictorial language is refreshingly crisp, linear, decisive. The second is a lifelong study of collage. And thirdly, the practice of watercolor painting, something I took up with renewed interest about ten years ago. Watercolor is usually connected with intimate, small-scale work. Often it's considered a kind of minor league medium. One of the pleasures of oil painting, for me, is to reverse this relationship—to make watercolor effects into something major, assertive, flamboyant. I would like to make images that are as volatile, but also delicate, as water itself.

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