



Water view nos 14, 15 and 18, 2011  
synthetic polymer paint on canvas

La Trobe University, Geoff Raby Collection of Chinese Art.  
Donated by Dr Geoff Raby AO through the Australian  
Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2019. © Guan Wei.  
Courtesy the artist, ARC ONE Gallery and Martin Browne  
Fine Art. Photos: Jia De

In May 2011, Guan Wei was forced out of his studio in Beijing by government officials, with only two days' notice. During this stressful period, the artist recalls missing 'the peaceful life in Australia, with its sunshine, white clouds, sea and beaches'. *Water view* is a series of paintings made shortly after Guan Wei's return to Australia from Beijing that same year. The panels depict scenes of everyday life and play on the beach as seen from the water. The paintings also feature the artist's signature floating clouds, mountains and rectangular red seals. However, in contrast to his *Day after tomorrow* series, the sea is presented here as a space for recreation and entertainment and perhaps also as a 'safe' space for the lively, playful pink figures. Here they are lying on the beach, snorkelling, sleeping and dancing, highlighting a confidence in displaying the body that is characteristic of Australian beach culture.

In his artist statement for the exhibition *Ways of being* in 1998, Guan Wei noted,

I try to emphasise three elements in my work: wisdom, knowledge and humour. I believe people need wisdom to choose from the many different cultural traditions that confront us every day; knowledge is the key to open our minds to the diversity of the world; and humour is necessary to comfort our hearts.  
(Guan Wei 1998).

Humour is particularly prevalent in the *Water view* series, a tool to convey the merging of worlds and cultures (Australian and Chinese). In *Water view no. 18*, the humorous play of perspective between the surfer and the tiny figure behind is also acknowledged by the

figure's body language and surprised expression, creating a kind of 'inside joke' within the painting itself.

The Chinese term for humour, *youmo* 幽默, was devised by writer and translator Lin Yutang in 1923. At the time, he claimed that there was no such corresponding term in traditional Chinese. In his 1934 essay, 'Lun youmo 論幽默' (On humour), he wrote, 'Any country's culture, lifestyle, literature, or thought needs to be enriched by humour' and that the lack of humour in society will create a more hypocritical, ultraconservative and outdated culture as time passes (Davis 2011). Lin's approach to humour aligns with Guan Wei's statement, using humour to emphasise elements of knowledge and wisdom. There is a sense of comfort and familiarity that the artist brings to the *Water view* series, inviting the viewer to reflect on the complexity of self-awareness, identity and our surroundings, offering a glimpse of a harmonious and open-minded multicultural society.

Bianca Winataputri, 2022

#### References:

Guan Wei 1998, artist's statement, in J Hardy (curator), *Ways of being*, Ivan Dougherty Gallery, College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales, Sydney, p. 56.

Guan Wei 2011, artist's statement, in *Play on the beach* exhibition catalogue, Martin Browne Contemporary, Sydney, p. 5.

Lin Yutang 2011, 'On humour', trans. J Sample, in JM Davis & J Chey (eds), *Humour in Chinese life and letters: classical and traditional approaches*, Hong Kong University Press, 2011, p. 189.