

**WTP ARTIST: ELEEN LIN**

Emily Jaeger  
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Eleen Lin in her studio

Born in Taiwan and raised in Thailand with a Western education, Eleen Lin is a true “third culture kid.” Lin studied at Slade School of Fine Art, UK (BA 2005), and Yale School of Art (MFA 2008). Her work has been exhibited in Guangdong Museum of Art, China; Queens Museum of Art, NY; Gwangju Museum of Art, Korea; and galleries throughout Austria, Thailand, Taiwan, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Lin has been awarded with the Elizabeth Canfield Hicks Award and Sanyu Scholarships, and she has participated in NYFA Immigrant Artist Projects, the Fountainhead Residency, and the AIM program from the Bronx Museum of Art.



Eleen Lin, ink drawings from *Mythopoeia* series

**Jaeger:** Your paintings appearing in this month’s issue are a selection from your series *Mythopoeia*, originally inspired by the nineteenth-century American novel, *Moby Dick*. As a self-described “third culture kid,” why did you choose this narrative as a subject of artistic inquiry?

**Lin:** Growing up, I studied in an international high school in Thailand. *Moby Dick* was one of the most challenging mandatory readings and I struggled to finish it. The nineteenth-century vocabulary, the countless digressions, and the complex allusions made it hard to fully comprehend. It wasn’t until a few years after moving to New England that I attempted to re-read this classic. Then, I was intrigued by many elements which were reminiscent of my experience as an immigrant artist: the cultural diversity of the crew-mates, the journey from New England to Asia, the segregation from society, and the mysticism of sea travel.

I was curious why *Moby Dick*, one of the greatest American novels, was never well received in Asia. When I read the Chinese translation, I realized there were a lot of mistranslations due to cultural differences. Additionally, there are even more footnotes in the Chinese edition than the original text.

I was inspired to retell the tale of *Moby Dick* through a different cultural lens.



Eleen Lin at work

**Jaeger: Could you talk about the designation “third culture kid” and its influence on the evolution of the project?**

**Lin:** As a third culture kid, which I would define as a person who grows up in more than one culture, I was exposed to a wider variety of cultural heritages. I tended to pick up on similarities between stories from different parts of the world.

While reading *Moby Dick* I realized there’s a similarity between the White Whale and Bake-kujira, animated skeletons of white whales which are bad omens in Japanese mythology. In my work, I combine these narratives into one, illustrating how the globalized world brings us closer together and creates a collective consciousness shared across cultural divides.

**Jaeger: Your pieces have a strong conceptual basis in cultural hybridity but also clear attention to color, light, and shape, such as in your fantastical portrayals of water in each painting. How do you balance the conceptual and compositional elements in each piece?**

**Lin:** I develop each painting according to a set process. My paintings usually begin with a vague pencil sketch that I turn into a watercolor study. Then, I paint a smaller piece to assist with the development of the final 7 feet by 8 feet painting. Each step helps me understand what will work best for the scale of the work and how to add new layers into the final composition, almost like how a poet would insert word play. I believe the balance between conceptual and compositional elements is achieved by years of learning through trial and error.



Eleen Lin, *Don't Leave Me Hanging*

**Jaeger:** You have worked in oil and acrylic on canvas in past series. Why did you decide to paint on linen in *Mythopoeia*? How did this change in medium influence your artistic process?

**Lin:** I have always been attracted to the color of raw canvas and linen. It reminds me of Chinese silk paintings, where blank silk forms the negative space in the painting. I wanted to think of linen not only as a surface to paint on but as material—to incorporate its raw, burlap-esque texture into nautical scenes.

**Jaeger:** In your last series, *Pet Society*, you explored human obsession with pets. *Moby Dick* also features an obsessive relationship between Captain Ahab and the White Whale. How have you pivoted the theme of animals in this new series?

**Lin:** *The Pet Society* series began when I adopted my first pet cat, Meme. Especially after moving to New York and understanding urbanites' attachments with their pets, I wanted to fuse old Chinese folklores about the human-animal relationships with this modern-day example. I feel that Captain Ahab has a similar obsession with *Moby Dick*. Captain Ahab wants to control and defeat the whale, but simultaneously its existence drives his.





Eleen Lin "Water is usually the first thing I put on the canvas."

**Jaeger:** One of my favorite pieces, "Don't Leave Me Hanging," combines a strong narrative feel with political undertones and surreal humor. How did you come to its particular imagery and can you walk us through the process of creating this piece?

**Lin:** I was trying to search a picture of a whale tail on Google images. Instead of a whale tail, all I got were pictures of high-riding G-strings. I wanted to continue playing with contemporary slang that related to the narrative of *Moby Dick*.

For example, "whale" can describe an overweight woman, "Quaker" is often more familiar as the commercial oatmeal brand than a religious movement (Captain Ahab was a Quaker).

I began with a sketch inspired by examples of ambiguous language and gestures. Since I completed this painting during my stay at the Fountainhead Residency in Miami, my color palette was also deeply inspired by the colors of the city.

**Jaeger:** Many of the paintings in *Mythopoeia* are rife with humor and fancy, often reminiscent of storybook illustrations. How do you see the roles of humor and childhood functioning in this series?

**Lin:** I have always believed that humor is the easiest way to communicate and even resolve conflict. It is something we share no matter where we come from. Humor is also a common trope in children's storybooks. Although my parents usually told me Chinese myths and legends as bedtime stories to teach me my cultural heritage, I was still drawn to Roald Dahl and the *Berenstain Bears*. I hope to use humor and storybook-like illustrations to establish a universal language that everyone can appreciate in combination with their personal interpretations of my work.



Eelen Lin's *Wet the Line*, in progress

**Jaeger:** You describe water as a stabilizing and recurring image in your art because of its prevalence in every place you've ever lived: "I felt like wherever I went, I'm comforted with the things that recur in different cultures." In *Mythopoeia*, your portrayal of water—bold, fantastical, and almost celestial—is, perhaps, realization in style unique to this series. Could you talk more about the stylistic development of water in your work?

**Lin:** I am fascinated by the variety of artistic depictions of water throughout history. No matter how the image is rendered, fluid or rigid, we always know what it signifies. Water also never signifies a specific place. A painting of water, out of context, could depict anywhere in the world.

Water is usually the first thing I put on the canvas. I let it loosely stain the surface and allow the paint to flow freely. The rest of the painting is composed around the initial shape of the water. The more I paint water, the more I'm able to lose control. It is the one part my paintings that is truly abstract and I'm still developing ways to play with various renderings.

**Jaeger:** You have referenced German expressionists such as Max Beckmann and traditional Chinese ink paintings. How exactly do these artistic forerunners influence your own work?

**Lin:** I have always admired how both the German expressionists and Chinese ink paintings intricately compress multiple perspectives into a confined space. German expressionists fit complex narratives and emotions into one picture, while Chinese ink paintings portray entire expeditions. These artists have taught me to explore different methods of composition so that my audiences can return to the same painting and always discover something new.

**Jaeger:** In your artist’s statement, you describe a tension in your artistic process between “free association and conscious control.” Could you talk about how this manifests in “Wet the Line”?

**Lin:** My paintings always develop from a central image. “Wet the Line” began with the image of a man harpooning a whale. As I sketched the water, I was drawn to the idea of portraying the scene as an artificial experience. I began to add seats and stage props to the painting. I liked the visual push and pull between the structurally repetitive, controlled patterns and the abstract fluidity of the water.

**Jaeger:** What do you think is the next evolution of your artistic process?

**Lin:** I still need another couple of years to finalize the whole *Moby Dick*-inspired series. I’m also working on a series of etchings that mimics old illustrations for this project. I have several ideas in mind for my next series, which might include stories such as *Ramayana*, *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, and *Inferno*.

However, as an artist, I am so open to ideas that I never quite know what is to come.

<https://www.thewoventalepress.net/2016/11/11/interview-eleen-lin/>