ON THE VERANDA
A Conversation

Gae Savannah

Somewhere in Asia, Meung Shei and Wysteria lounge on the veranda, off the back salon of the main house. Chatting over tea, they toss about some of the meanings inherent in their names, fabrics, and accoutrements.

WYSTERIA: Oh my, the Puritans are acting up again.

MEUNG SHEI: Oh, and amongst the rustic New England prairie cottages and darling forest animals, Hawthorne’s Young Goodman Brown is off to his high-minded appointment.

WYSTERIA: Yes, and beribboned Faith is true-heartedly endeavoring to rein in her God-fearing husband.

MEUNG SHEI: Yeah, heh heh, Brown has scared the be-Jesus out of her?

WYSTERIA: . . . and, not imprudently I daresay. Anyway, see this Puritan guy galloping through the forest across the fabric? He is chasing down a lady riding through town naked on a white horse. For centuries in the Pagan era, this maiden’s ride ensured a rich and prodigious harvest for the season, but the Puritans will clamp down on such debauchery.

MEUNG SHEI: Yes, like all the other bacchanalian occasions such as May Day (Floralia) that they squelched in cold pursuit of higher moral ground?

WYSTERIA: Right.

MEUNG SHEI: Wysteria, your interior magenta Christmas ornaments, do they have anything to do with the month-long, December, Pagan festival, Saturnalia?

WYSTERIA: Sure. The Christmas tree is one of the only remaining vestiges of Pagan colorful celebration of nature and its cycles; not to mention, mystical acknowledgement of our unruly passions. The practice of garnishing the tree with ribbons and shiny globes began as a measure to pay homage to the woodland spirits during their difficult winter “death” months.

MEUNG SHEI: So, as in Mists of Avalon, there is a bit of a clash going on in these charmed woods—does seem as if Puritan Christian social structure is prevailing?

WYSTERIA: Well, as Bradley lamely ended her book with all the remaining Avalon girls at the nunnery, you might
think so, but I can’t be that fatalistic. Just as your ethereal pool suggests, Meung Shei, the mystical sentence of nature isn’t going anywhere. In Morocco for example, the mystical is everywhere, with the haunting call to prayer resonating in the air through alleyways and tuffeted salons alike.

MEUNG SHEI: Didn’t you say your maize backdrop with repeated vase pattern is from Morocco? On one hand, the stylized pattern is so sentimental. It evokes the frivolity and vacuity associated with a European Rococo style interior.

WYSTERIA: Well, most of the fabrics reveal both profound and superficial layers of cultural meaning. While my multifarious greens intimate yin (female principle), the glowing yellow can be the warmth and graciousness of the Moroccans. As a matter of fact, yellow evokes simultaneously radiating emotions and keen mental energy. Something like the emotional impact of your intellect.

MEUNG SHEI: Hmmm? Hey, doesn’t Wysteria the flower itself, signify generous welcoming as well as mental clarity?

WYSTERIA: Indeed. It’s amazing, the name just popped up from nowhere, midstream in the process of my construction. It turns out it’s one of the official plants for the Pagan Imbolic (later renamed Candlemas) festival of lights. This celebration of the increasing power of the light in early Spring (February 1st) connects Wysteria to the illumination, fire, of both the inspiration and crafting of art.

MEUNG SHEI: Wow. And other symbols, deer for instance, which connotes not only the feminine, but also intuitive wisdom—did you intentionally weave everything together?

WYSTERIA: No oh! On the contrary, the intuitive art process created the tapestry. Just now, I’m unraveling some of the meanings. Actually, with all these rather deep implications, it’s ironic that my composition evolved out of a vague recollection of Kim Novak in the trashy Hollywood film The Amorous Adventures of Moll Flanders. I had this picture in my mind of her all in laced-up, blousy bodice and full skirts with arms laden with laundry to hang.

MEUNG SHEI: Na ha ah? Too much. So what about the Indian and Chinese silks?

WYSTERIA: Well, I see the Chinese floral prints as female-engendered domesticity—as in Asian silk house jackets or pillows. I can imagine the turquoise, green, and white plaid as smart seat cushions in any fashionable continental house in, say, Indo-China.

MEUNG SHEI: And the plaid brings us back to the WASPs, the Puritans; yet it is made in India. Go figure.

WYSTERIA: Go pastiche! It’s America, remember.

MEUNG SHEI: Ha ha.

WYSTERIA: Anyway, you use the same turquoise, Indian Shantung-silk plaid for your canopy, Meung Shei. How does that fit in with dream water? Meaning of name “Meung Shei”?

MEUNG SHEI: Plaid, well I agree, harkens back to WASPs and Europe but
Top: Meung Shei, 2003, fabric and mixed media, 117” x 95” x 66”; bottom: Wysteria, 2002, mixed media, 114” x 72” x 60”. Photos: Courtesy the artist.
here just perhaps as a context for an external, fabricated vision of Asia. You know, the stuff Edward Said discusses in *Orientalism*.

WYSTERIA: Yes, I keep getting Ingres’ big dresses from your blue taffeta. And then there’s all that James Hillman *Blue Fire* stuff on blue. Have you thought about that? You know, the mind from the beginning must be based in the blue firmament, the azure heaven of Boehm, *philo sophia*, sapphire throne of mysticism, return of all things to their imaginal ground, etc., etc. . . .

MEUNG SHEI: Absolutely. And I love his point about poetic distortion. He says, mythical talk must be full of hyperbole; the gods live in the highs and deeps. From the start, I also hope to link palpable substance with elusive language, thought, and emotion.

WYSTERIA: Makes me think of Richard Tuttle with his object-space transfiguration. His objects start out as physical but become more about an uncanny displacement of space and perception.

MEUNG SHEI: Right. Of course his materials are more throwaway, frail bits and pieces, while mine are more substantive, sumptuous.

WYSTERIA: Well, yes. Your main thing is all that comforting, corporeal volume. While Tuttle is kind of a wren, you’re a manatee.

MEUNG SHEI: Ha ha. True. But I want the wind and the waves. When you sit on the porches of the temples at Kamakura and Kyoto and gaze at the ponds, the organic things around you dissolve into space.

WYSTERIA: Ah yes. Each of your fabrics, especially for me the sea-foam green, bamboo-leaf Chinese brocade, gently expands beyond its physical parameters.

MEUNG SHEI: Totally, I feel that fabric embodies the expansive airiness of a dream. It’s tangible and intangible simultaneously.

WYSTERIA: Well, and not only do the bamboo sprigs and pale green-aqua color melt and out of our sight with the subtle movements of our position, but the frolicking poofy forms on the floor, rocks, waves, or animal spirits that come to drink at the pool, also transcend their physicality, but just in a different way.

MEUNG SHEI: Hmm. To me the sprawling blue fabric forms, seen in relation to the pellucid water, seem to be lulled into a breeze or even a hush, with the gurgling of the fountain the only sensation the senses are aware of.

WYSTERIA: Yeah. It’s like that section at the end of Mishima’s *Running Horses* when Isao, upon relinquishing his striving, finds everything was arriving from elsewhere, and then finally, there was only endless sea.

MEUNG SHEI: Yup. Also, Robert Irwin. I love his definition of art as a frame of mind. He speaks of an essential kind of knowing, which comes from a purely phenomenological basis. I too hope to impact visitors in terms of directly experienced essences: emotional, perceptual, or whatever.

WYSTERIA: But then of course, *base*, heavy-handed femininity returns, and you throw in a coy ruse.
MEUNG SHEI: Well sure, I couldn't resist. Yes, besides the fake Lotus blossoms, there are sparkly hand-mirrors lining the bottom of the pool that skews the whole pure experience drift a bit.

WYSTERIA: And, your picnicy, sweetly wholesome, lime-green-check and glass-encrusted aqua berry, vanity-bench interior: so tritely prim, so contrived!

MEUNG SHEI: Exactly. As yin needs yang, it's best to have a healthy balance between the spiritual and the mundane.

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