

# *The Comet and The Nostalgic Souls*

**SUPAWICH WEESAPEN**

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*Text by Roger Nelson*

As 2023 began, while Supawich Weesapen was finalising work on the exhibition called *The Comet and the Nostalgic Souls*, astronomers across the planet were also hard at work. The artist's task was to convey in his paintings some deeply philosophical ideas and cosmically complex feelings that cannot be conveyed by any other means. His works metaphorise a kind of romance between one energy force that grows from humanity, and another that emerges from a distant past; drawn toward each other, these fields of energy enact a kind of intergalactic dance, and invoke a kind of longing for some unnameable thing we have never known and can never touch. By contrast, the astronomers' task was to try to express their excitement at the unanticipated presence of an emerald green-hued comet with the rather prosaic name of C/2022 E3 (Z.T.F.). After being discovered for the first time as recently as March in the previous year, on 2 February 2023, this precious jewel of a comet came unusually close to Earth, for the first time in 50,000 years. During its last visit, the planet was in the midst of an ice age.

**“Their activity makes it look like they’re alive,” one astronomer said. Explaining the slow yet spectacular life cycle of comets, he continued: “When they’re far from the sun they’re sleeping, and when they get close to the sun they wake up.”**<sup>1</sup>

The glowing core of a comet—its most alive and awake fiery heart—is called a coma. The word *coma* is also commonly used to refer to a state of deep or prolonged unconsciousness in humans. Yet in a comet, the magnificent, molten mass we call a coma is the part that glows so brightly in the presence of the sun as to create the magical illusion of life, almost consciousness. So too, Supawich plays with the inert, inanimate stuff of oil pigments to make pictures that glow with an eerily lively brightness. His paintings are a triumph of radiance; they seem almost to be propelled by some greater, gravitational force.

The radiance of Supawich's paintings—their luminosity, their brilliance (in both senses of the word)—simulates that of a digital screen. For this reason, it is a glow that will look familiar, even though his work is so unexpected, unusual, fresh and new. The familiarity of this digital incandescence comes from its presence in our lives not only every day, but in every moment: the familiarity of the glowing digital screens is the familiarity, almost, of our own body, since we hold these digital screens in our hands, in our pockets, with our most precious things, all day and every day. Supawich's paintings, made through a centuries-old process of layering pigments with oil and turpentine on canvas, mimic as if by magic the iridescent glow of liquid crystal display (LCD) screens. Despite being ubiquitous for quite some time now, these LCD talismans of luminosity still feel a little otherworldly. And despite being ubiquitous for quite some time now, oil-on-canvas pictures are still capable of surprising us.

Remember? **“Their activity makes it look like they’re alive,”** the astronomer said of the comet (although he could also have been speaking of Supawich’s paintings). We are used to associating light with aliveness and alertness. When our computer screen goes dark, it is **“sleeping.”** When we tap a touch screen and it responds with instantaneous illumination, we say that we have **“woken it up.”** At some level, we know that these electronic devices are inanimate and lifeless; indeed, recent debates about the rapid expansion of easy access to artificial intelligence bots have rekindled old fears about machines acquiring sentience.<sup>2</sup> Yet we habitually personify and even anthropomorphise the technologies we use and touch the most, just as scientists happily describe comets in terms that serve to bring these unimaginably distant and dazzling orbs within our cognitive and even affective reach. **“Because each comet is its own living being, you don’t know how it’s going to react until it passes the sun,”**<sup>3</sup> the same astronomer remarked. A comet is not alive in the way that you and I are, but for us to bring its ungovernable gleam within the realm of the thinkable, we use our language to make it vital, to grant it the status of a living being. This is what Supawich does with paint: he uses it to make the unimaginable come into view.

That this intensely, supernaturally green comet called C/2022 E3 (Z.T.F.) should make its once-in-many-lifetimes visit to Earth while Supawich was finishing work on *The Comet and the Nostalgic Souls* feels like cosmic fate. Not only because in the exhibition, the artist gestures toward imagery of comets as his chosen form of what he calls *metaphoring*—and more on this later—and not only because Supawich is such a rare and precocious and blazing talent, but also because the efforts of the astronomers to express the wonder and rareness of this phenomenon, this moment, recall the artist’s own attempts to convey that which is beyond language and understanding.

*Deep time* is what we see in Supawich’s paintings, just as in the searing tail of the comet. A comet comes from a past so distant that we cannot imagine it. By contrast, Supawich’s paintings, in emulating the backlit illumination of a digital screen, are very *now*. The colours, which follow the red-green-blue (RGB) values usually seen on screens, rather than the cyan-magenta-yellow-key (CMYK) system usually associated with pigments laid on top of a surface, are also very contemporary. Yet these assertively now paintings glow not only as if they are made from the same digital stuff as ubiquitous consumer screen technologies, but also as if they come from an eery and unfamiliar universe separated from us by unfathomable chasms of space and time.

Time and space: these are concepts we use every day, and yet when placed under even the slightest cognitive pressure, or examined with even the slightest epistemological care, they dissolve like the spectral and indistinct shapes within Supawich’s compositions. Theoretical physicists suggest that the passage of time is an elastic illusion.<sup>4</sup> The acclaimed Carlo Rovelli, for example, famously writes that in his thinking, **“the difference between past and future vanishes.”**<sup>5</sup> Many others argue that there is no such thing as time, meaning that it cannot be observed, measured, or proven.

How, then, to explain anemoia, our experience of nostalgia or longing for a time that we have never experienced? How to refer to moments in history or prehistory—those vast seas and oceans of time—without a sense of temporal movement, of the past? Theoretical physicists in the twenty-first century, like poets and shamans, render us sensible to the sensuousness of senselessness. Perhaps Supawich may be one of them. He limns an image of time, even while showing us that time is an illusion.

But do I mean this? Do I mean it literally? Or am I metaphoring? As mentioned above, this is the term the artist uses to describe his strategy of composition. Sometimes, when I ask him about a painting, he answers by presenting me with a poem. These poems—written sometimes in English, sometimes in Thai—are not *explanations* of his paintings, he’s careful to clarify. Rather, they **“come from the same atmosphere.”** After making a painting, he’ll use **“the leftover mood”** to make a poem—or on occasion, after making a song or a poem, he’ll continue with the feeling into a painting. The first few times this happened, I thought Supawich was exercising his **“right to opacity,”** to borrow a phrase;<sup>6</sup> that is, I thought he was refusing to answer my questions, declining to disclose the thinking behind his paintings. But I’ve since realised, with thanks to his patient explanations and—pardon the pun—clarifications, that he is, rather, proposing the radical possibility and potential of *transparency*. When we look upon something transparent, we see whatever is behind it. When we look upon a painting by Supawich, we see a poem; when we look upon his poems, we see his paintings. And what is behind these paintings—space, time—are essential and yet illusory. Space and time are, perhaps, also exercises in radical *transparency*.

Supawich is drawn to anemoia, that feeling of missing something that we never felt in the first place; it is one of the ineffable experiences he thinks about when making his work. Despite the unusualness of the word, the term anemoia is strangely specific. Its specificity is deceptive: the term's range of meanings and connotations can only be loosely described, and never precisely defined. Coined by John Koenig in his 2012 book, *The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows*, anemoia is described as **“a kind of wanderlust”** for the world depicted in old photos; a feeling of **“longing to step through the frame into a world of black and white.”**<sup>7</sup> Yet, as Koenig recognises, this is a **“longing”** that is doomed to disappointment; not only can we never **“step through the frame”** into the past, but we can't even come close to understanding what it might have felt like to live in a bygone era. The author metaphorises this by suggesting that what we see as **“flickering silence and grainy black-and-white”** would, by contrast, have been experienced by people in the past as **“vivid color rushing by in three dimensions.”**<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps the painterly indistinctness of the hazy shapes in Supawich's paintings—their feathered edges and fugitive forms, advancing and receding in the imagined space of the picture plane as our eye roves across the pristinely flat surface of the picture—can be understood as a corollary of this fundamental and inescapable disconnect between ourselves and the deep time for which we feel a sad longing, a stubborn nostalgia. But if these blurry blobs in his works owe their very blurriness to the imprecision of anemoia as a term and concept, then it is not to illustrate the idea, but rather to offer a way into inhabiting it. Supawich's paintings are not depictions or diagrams of the feelings or effects of nostalgia and unease and deep time. They are vehicles with which we may enter these concepts and experiences. His artwork is an example of what the scholar Mieke Bal calls **“image-thinking.”** She describes image-thinking not as a formula or a result but rather as a continual *process*.<sup>9</sup>

Many things that are unthinkable become thinkable in art. As well as being visited by a green comet named C/2022 E3 (Z.T.F.) that last approached earth during the palaeolithic period, other strange things have happened on this planet while Supawich was working on this exhibition. Two scientists named Xiaodong Song and Yi Yang announced in a surprising and contested publication that the earth's inner core—its molten centre, some 5,000 kilometres beneath our feet—had started to change the direction in which it was turning. Its rotation, they claimed, **“came to near halt around 2009 and then turned in an opposite direction.”** As shocking as this sounds, it is, according to Song and Yi, quite normal: **“We believe the inner core rotates, relative to the Earth's surface, back and forth, like a swing.”**<sup>10</sup>

In the context of the climate crisis and other harbingers of end-times, it can be tempting to read such discoveries—to perceive the concurrence of the comet, the reversal of the earth's core, and other seismic events in quantum physics—as grandiose metaphors of late-capitalist doom. Yet it is worth remembering that for centuries, humanity has been fascinated with observing the mysterious choreographies of the celestial bodies. For example, in India, the first astronomical use of a telescope was in 1618, to observe the visitation from two comets that appeared in the sky at the same time; this was the earliest recorded use of an astronomical telescope in South or Southeast Asia.<sup>11</sup> Today, most telescopes are digital devices. Might Supawich's paintings be equipped with a kind of zoom lens?

Looking at comets, we may seek pleasure or even understanding, but we know we cannot hope to fix them in space or time; comets are, by definition, in perpetual and unstoppable motion. Can paintings also be said to be machines of incessant movement? The late curator Pier Luigi Tazzi described the experience of being in the presence of the artist Nim Kruasaeng's work as being **“in an indefinable state for which, right now, I would use the term *dispersion*. By which I mean a dispersion of consciousness, of critical self-awareness.”**<sup>12</sup> With these words, we can feel Tazzi reaching towards an explanation for something that he knows is also beyond language, and inexplicable. Paintings like Nim's—and paintings like Supawich's—cannot be caught or captured, and the experience of them cannot ever be quite encapsulated, any more than a comet can be stopped as it courses through the universe. The point is the attempt, the reaching, the simple and slowed-down looking and longing and dispersion.

In his young yet ever-shifting practice, Supawich also seems to be striving with a contented knowledge that this reaching and dispersion will continue in perpetuity. In just a few short years, the artist has moved through several distinct series of paintings, which have brought him to *The Comet and the Nostalgic Souls*. In one body of work, Supawich's metaphoring saw him painting the curlicued licks and flames of lightning, or some other alluring yet alarming field of energy. In another, he gave us rectilinear fields of pure white light: digital screens writ large, made into mechanised suns and portals and forcefields. In both these series, the artist's use of canvases of strange shapes

and sizes reflected his desire—his need, his superpower—for, as he playfully calls it, “**bending space and time.**” Like many artists of his generation, he is interested in the digital sublime; perhaps he is drawn to it, but also at some level, terrified by its vastness and volume.

As well as appearing to glow with the electric pulse of digital screens, the paintings that comprise Supawich’s various bodies of work also share a common approach to colour. I have mentioned already that they adopt the tones of the RGB colour code, used to construct colours on screens. In the RGB system, adding more colour makes the image lighter, brighter, and closer to white. This is a kind of wizardry, a counter-intuitive contrast to the way we all remember to make colours with paint, wherein the addition of more colour makes the image darker, murkier, and further from white. Amazingly, the artist confesses that his use of these RGB-scale colours was accidental, not intentional: he had been painting in this way for some time before he realised what he was doing.

“**To me, RGB colours are natural,**” he says, with full awareness of how strange this sounds, and yet seemingly without irony. The blue of the sky on a screen is not the blue of the sky seen with the naked eye, yet to Supawich—perhaps to many in his generation, who have come of age with an always already present awareness of and comfort with the digital realm—the blue of the sky on the screen is just as real, just as *natural*, as the blue of the sky itself.

In addition to the use of the RGB colour scale, though, Supawich’s paintings (in *The Comet and the Nostalgic Souls* and in his previous bodies of work) also share a remarkably disciplined insistence on using only one colour, in addition to white. The tonal gradations the artist extracts between, for example, the darkest amethyst-like purple and the most radiant white takes time to fully appreciate, yet once perceived, is remarkable and irresistible. This repeated recourse to a single colour and white—a kind of digital two-tone colour scheme, if you like—recalls the earliest, most primitive forms of digital screen technology, in which a cursor the same green as the C/2022 E3 (Z.T.F.) comet would flashe like an otherworldly life-force on an inscrutable field of black. Supawich inverts this, of course—the black of those early screens becomes the glowing white of the screens that now surround us with previously unimaginable omnipresence—and in doing so, he borrows from the aesthetics of fashion, advertising and other realms of design. His colours are not only very now, but they are very *in*—they act like calendars, telling us what year it is, what season it is, just as much as they disorient us about which galaxy we are in.

In doing so, these paintings have an indexical relationship to the present—in all its fast-forward fleetingness—even while they also invoke an almost spiritual apprehension of deep time, of a presence or force or visitation (like the green comet) that comes from a past we can only begin to hope to try to imagine.

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<sup>1</sup> Shannon Hall, “How to Watch the ‘Green Comet’ While You Still Can,” *The New York Times*, 20 January 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/green-comet-watch.html>.

<sup>2</sup> At the time of writing, a chatbot called ChatGPT (developed by OpenAI) is making headlines with its ability to write texts that closely approximate human authorship.

<sup>3</sup> Hall, “How to Watch.”

<sup>4</sup> Natalie Wolchover, “Does Time Really Flow? New Clues Come From a Century-Old Approach to Math,” *Quanta Magazine*, 7 April 2020, <https://www.quantamagazine.org/does-time-really-flow-new-clues-come-from-a-century-old-approach-to-math-20200407/>.

<sup>5</sup> Carlo Rovelli, *The Order of Time*, trans. Erica Serge and Simon Carnell (New York: Riverhead Books, 2018), p. 33.

<sup>6</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> John Koenig, *The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows* (New York: NSimon & Schuster, 2012), p. 167.

<sup>8</sup> Koenig, *Dictionary*, p. 168.

<sup>9</sup> Mieke Bal, *Image-Thinking: Artmaking as Cultural Analysis* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022).

<sup>10</sup> AFP, “Earth’s inner core may have started spinning other way, study shows,” *The Straits Times*, 24 January 2023. <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/europe/earths-inner-core-may-have-started-spinning-other-way-study>

<sup>11</sup> Wayne Orchiston et al, “Exploring the History of Philippine Astronomy: Catholics, Comets, Eclipses and Ethnoastronomy,” in *Exploring the History of Southeast Asian Astronomy: A Review of Current Projects and Future Prospects and Possibilities*, ed. W. Orchiston, M. N. Vahia (New York: Springer, 2021), p. 103.

<sup>12</sup> Pier Luigi Tazzi, “Distant Attunements,” in *Trance-Formations: Nim Kruasaeng*, solo exhibition catalogue (Bangkok: Ver Gallery, 2007), unpaginated. Emphasis added.