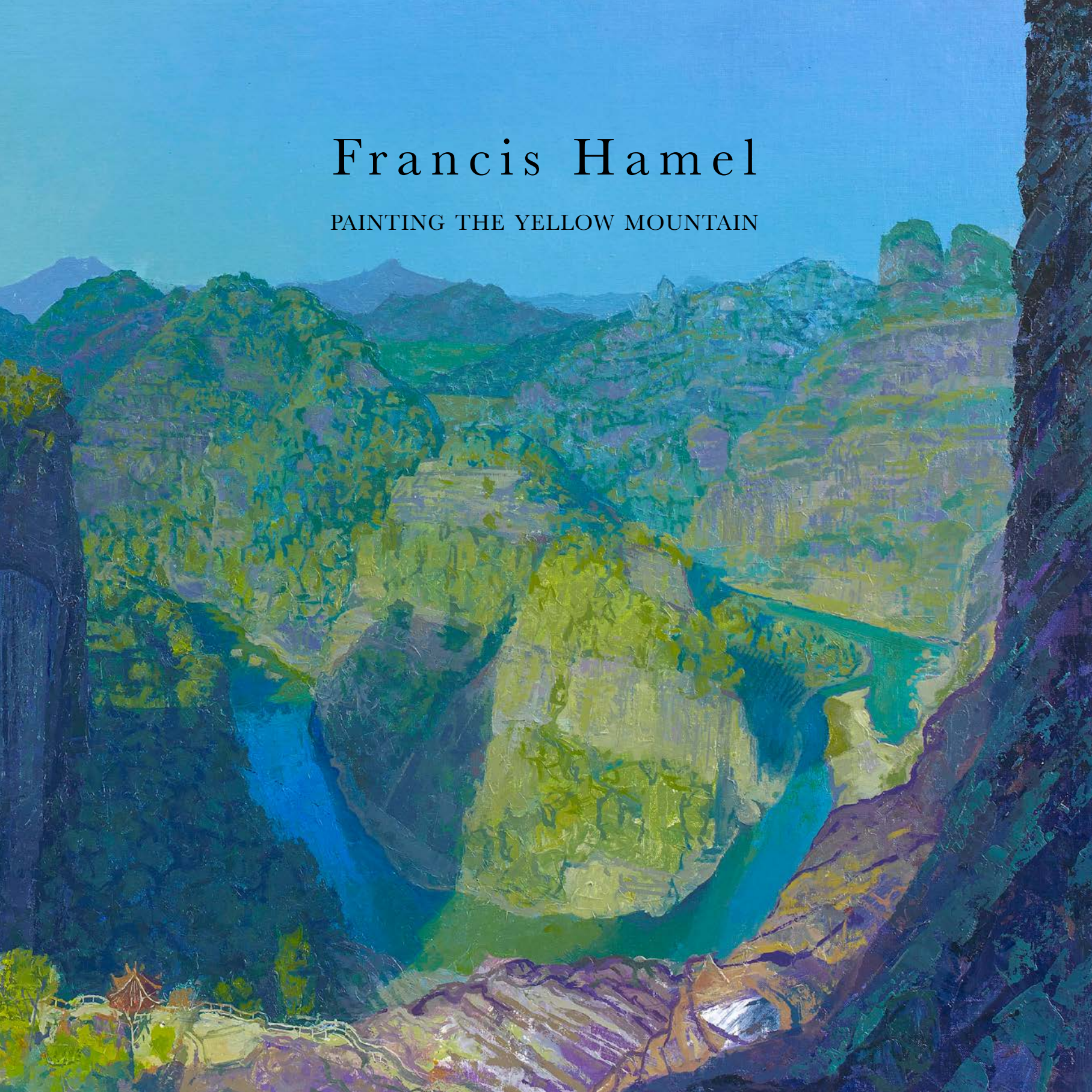


# Francis Hamel

PAINTING THE YELLOW MOUNTAIN



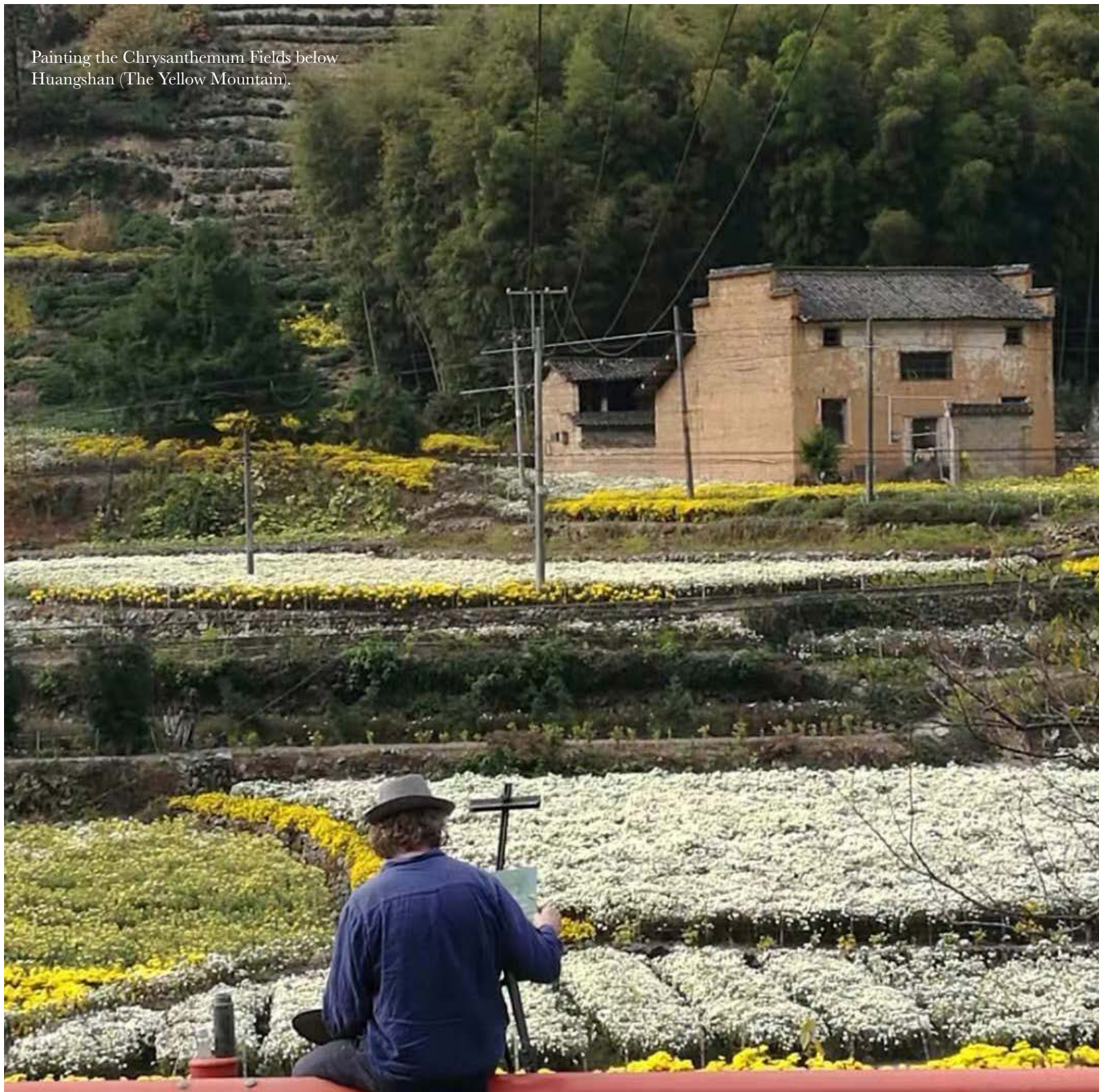


# Francis Hamel

PAINTING THE YELLOW MOUNTAIN

John Martin Gallery  
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London W1S 4JG  
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Painting the Chrysanthemum Fields below  
Huangshan (The Yellow Mountain).



## *Painting the Yellow Mountain*

I visited China with my paints twice in 2019. First in March and then from October to December. Foraging for new material in exotic landscapes is one of my favourite things. I wasn't sure what to expect or how easy I would find it to paint outside in China. After painting twenty-seven portraits of actors, writers and directors it was time for a change. I travelled first via Hong Kong to Yunnan in the South West, visiting Xizhou, Dali, Shaxi, Shangri-La and Lijiang. On my second trip I started in Shanghai and then took the train to Wuyishan, Huangshan, Hangzhou, on to Guilin and Yangshuo before flying back to a riot torn Hong Kong. I painted everywhere.

Before leaving the UK, I visited the famous Chinese collection in The Ashmolean museum to look at some of the ink paintings and drawings there. It was hard to tell how accurately these described real landscapes in mainland China. For the Chinese, mountains are more than just mountains, they evoke the eternal, the vastness of nature and the unity of man and nature. Xie He in the sixth century said that 'spirit resonance' is the most important element in judging a painting. The energy passed from landscape, through artist and brush into the work. Chinese landscape painting has always been conceptual, description is always in partnership with ideas, a poem that combined image and language.

It was a surprise to discover landscapes in mainland China that were so close to the ink paintings in the museum. I was keen to see how my 'spirit resonance' would work with paints and brushes in these extraordinary new landscapes. I worked intensively for over two months and returned to my studio in Oxfordshire with a suitcase full of paintings and a lot of ideas. I didn't get the feeling I was following in anyone's footsteps. The Chinese love their landscape but their approach to painting is mostly quite different to mine.

Looking at the work in the twilight of a December day in Northern Europe it felt as though I'd been plein-air painting on the set of a science fiction movie. I immediately saw various patterns and themes in the work which have since translated into bigger, more ambitious paintings. These always happen in the studio and are the offspring of small pieces done outside.

I have no long-standing connection with China, no deep knowledge of the place, the people or of Chinese art. After two visits I can claim only to have been amazed and delighted by the food, the people and most of all by the landscape. I have generated quite a large body of work which feels like the beginning of something rather than the end. The landscapes I have visited are deeply extraordinary and massively compelling. These paintings are not Chinese, they are paintings of China by a curious European.

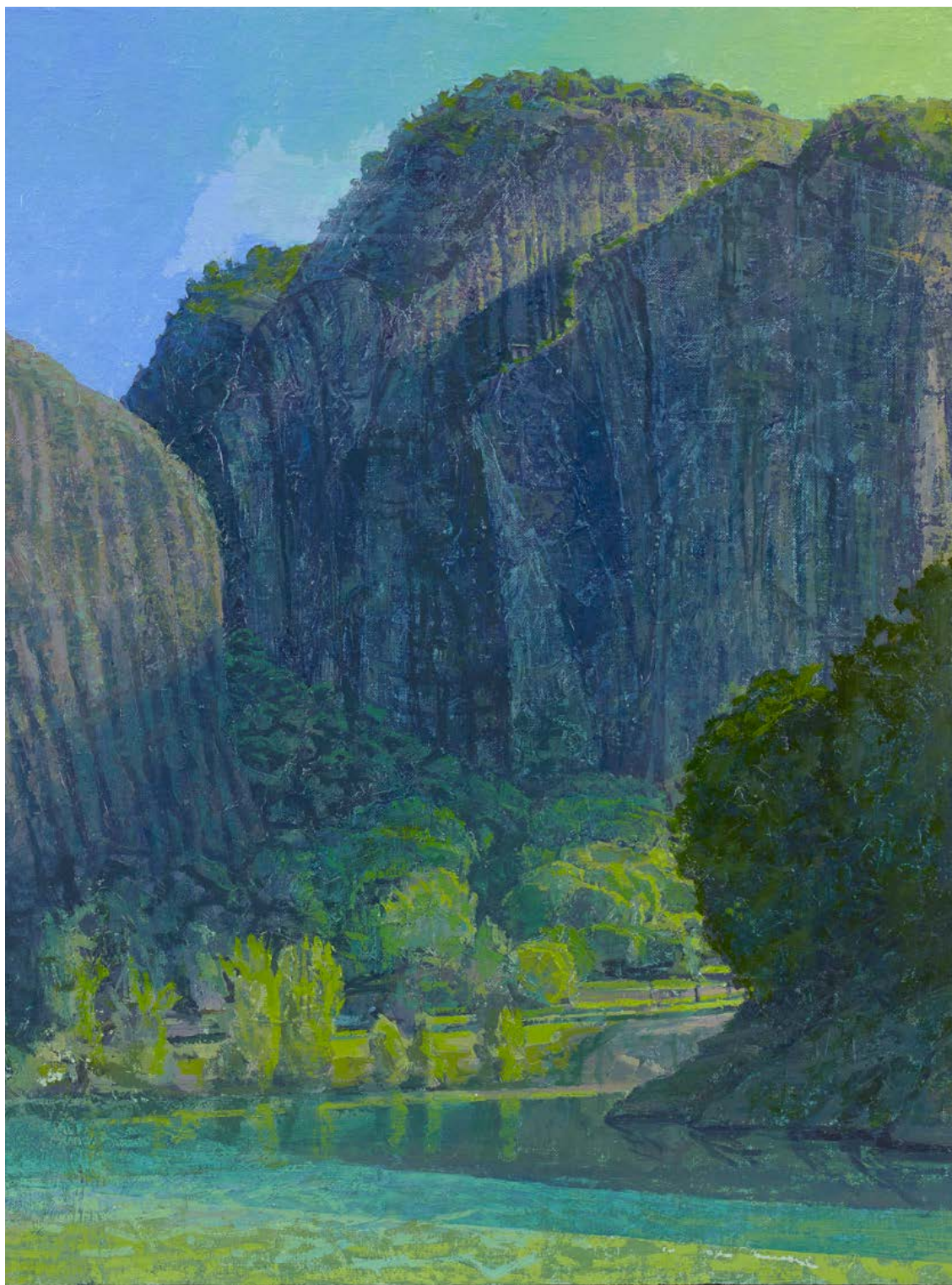
Francis Hamel, 2020





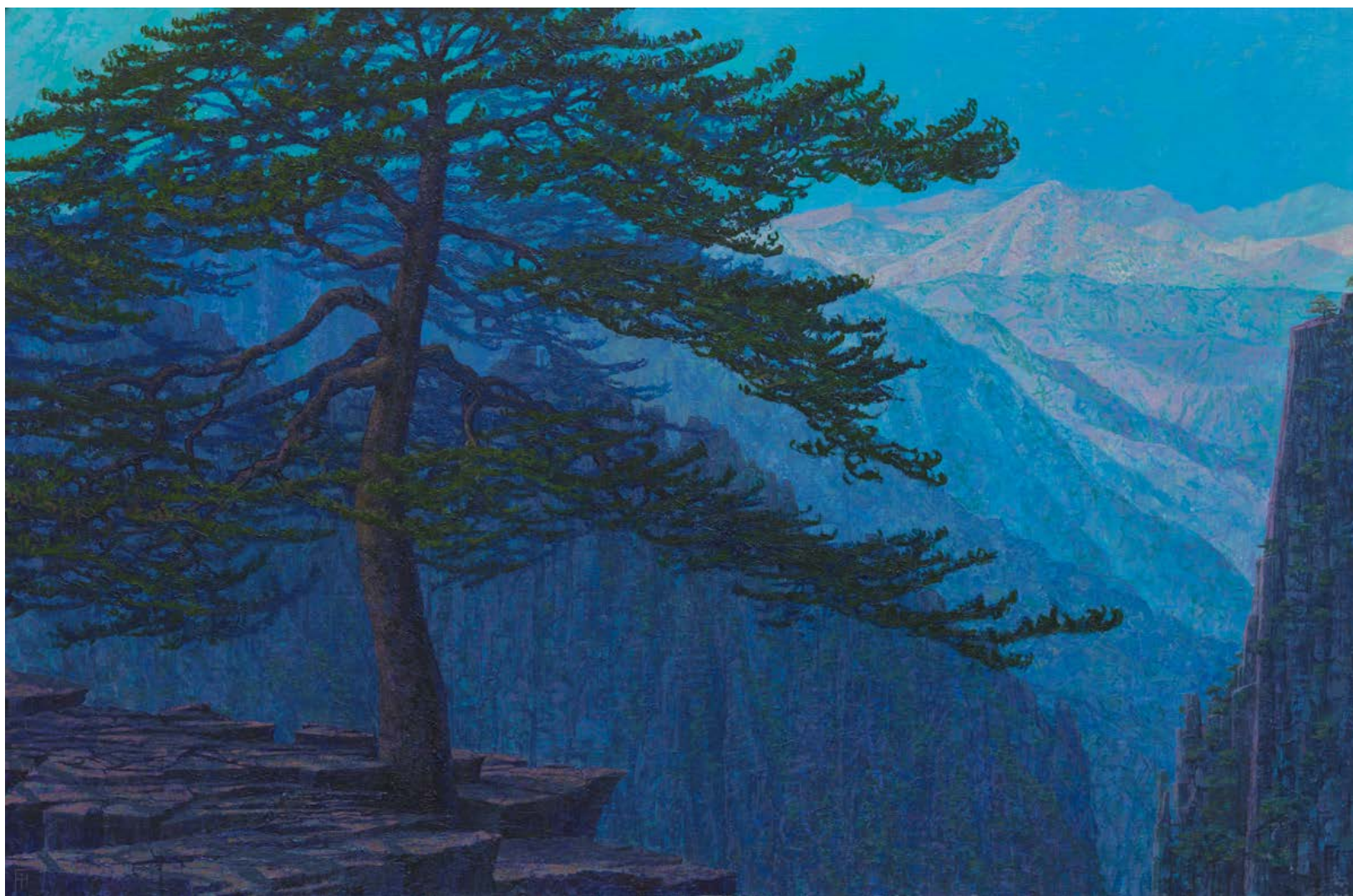
15. Hong Kong, The Forest  
oil on linen laid on panel  
48 x 32 ins, 122 x 81 cms



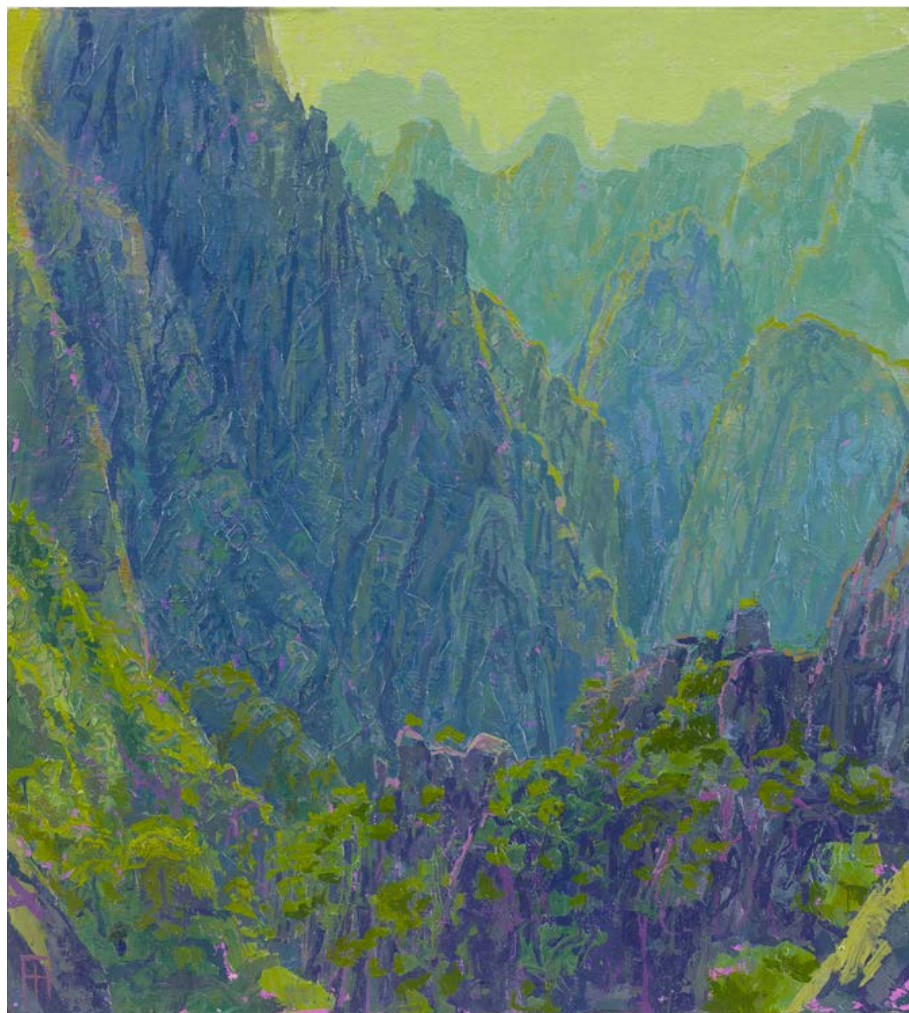


4. The Nine Bend River (Jiuqu Xi)  
below Wuyi Mountain  
oil on linen laid on board  
17 x 13 ins, 43 x 33 cms





35. Huangshan Pine on the Yellow Mountain  
oil on linen laid on board  
44 x 68 ins, 112 x 173 cms



11. Huangshan Mountain Study  
oil on linen laid on panel  
17 x 13 ins, 33 x 43 cms

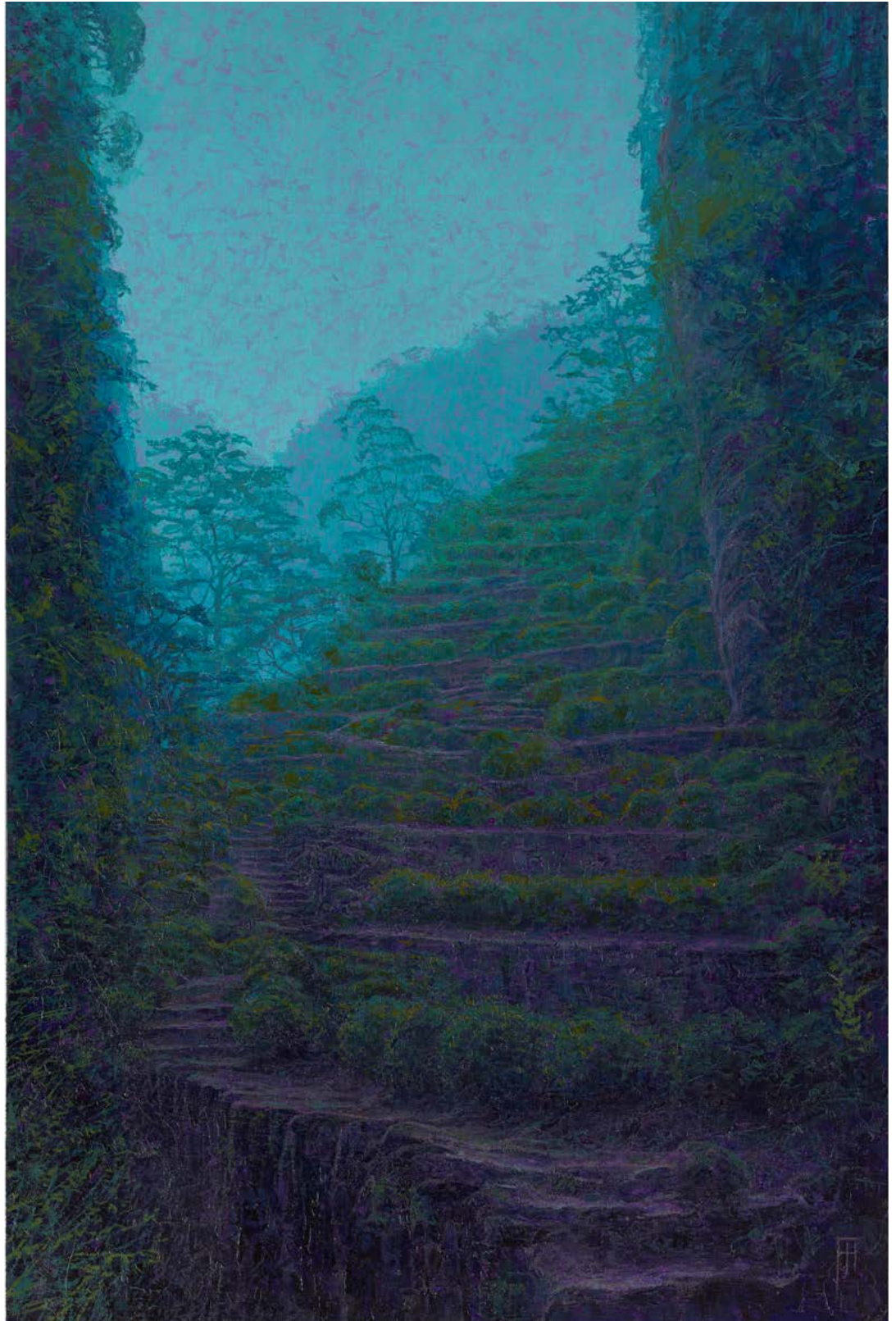


*A terrible night and a six a.m start...dawn is at six. I loaded up with paints, panels and easel and headed up beyond the hotel towards the canyon. The landscape was utterly mind boggling. Huge stone structures, some almost architectural, others just random fun and games from Mother Nature, set in a vast diorama stretching back into the distance and the whole crazy vastness dotted with the mad little Huangshan pines stretching out like little wizened bonsais into the grey morning air.*

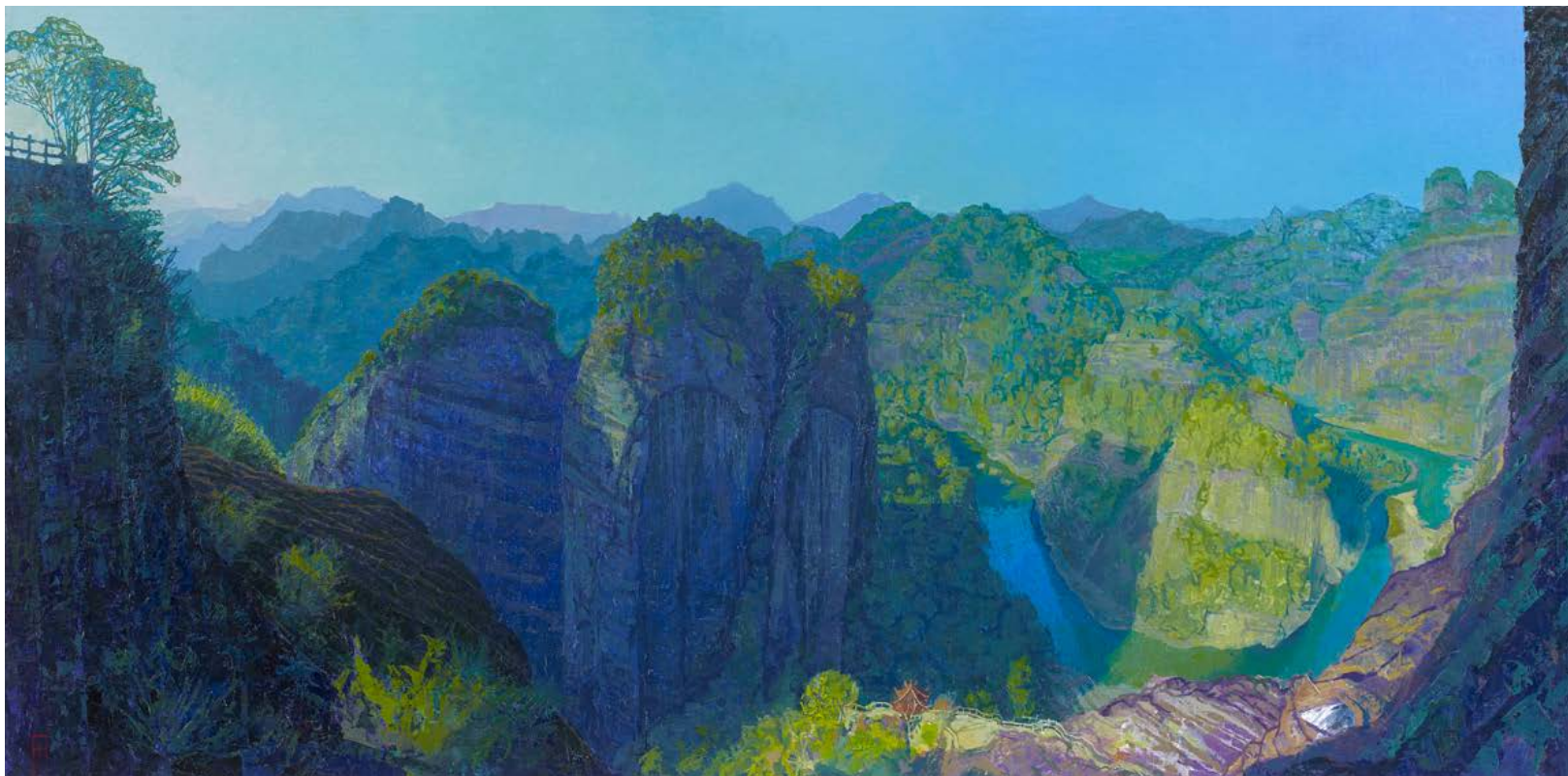
*I found a perch and got out a nice big panel and started to paint. I had about an hour of peace with just the occasional passer by and then, across the echoing vault of granite you start to hear the sound of ten thousand plodding feet, the visitors are arriving, within half an hour I went from observer to observed, subject to object. The scale and otherworldliness of the landscape is beyond description and compelling enough to hold my attention in spite of the footfall. My next walk took me down about five hundred steps, through caves and along narrow little winding paths clinging to vast precipitous facades of rock until I found a little area with a seat, a jutting out dead tree and an unfeasibly marvellous view. A family had settled in for lunch but now that I have adopted the Chinese approach to personal space, I moved in with easel and paints and they of course didn't bat an eyelid. The light was being difficult, hard to see what I was doing and so I worked on the ground at the start to set the palette and get the colours working and then, once my cohabitants had moved on, spread out and got going.*

Huangshan, 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2019

16. Terraced Tea Plantation, Wuyishan  
oil on linen laid on panel  
48 x 32 ins, 122 x 81 cms





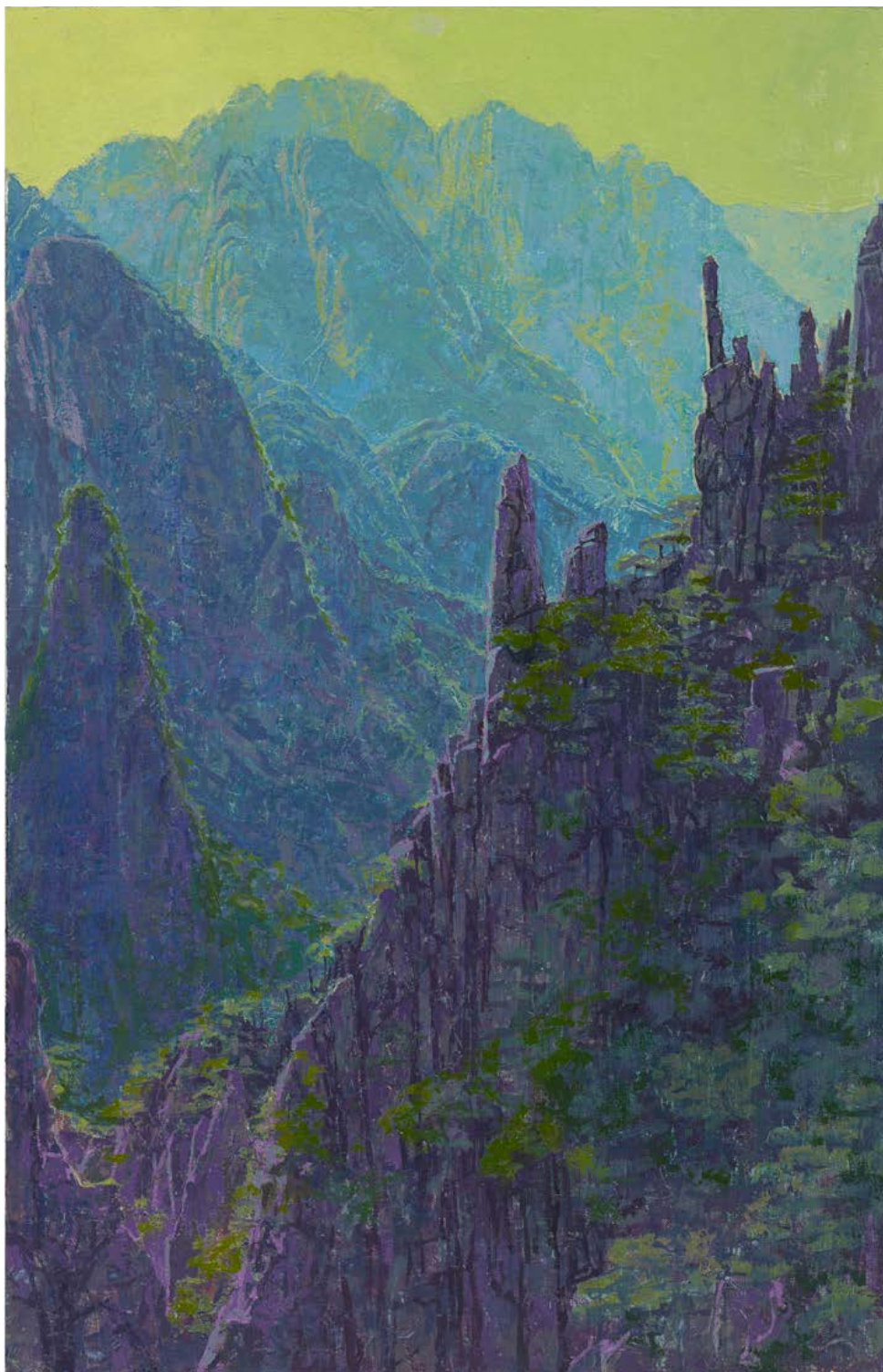


3. Wuyi Mountain, Wuyishan. View of the Nine Bend River (Fujian)  
oil on linen laid on panel,  
24 x 48 ins, 61 x 121 cms



22. Row of Huangshan Pines at Dawn  
oil on linen laid on panel, 18 x 22 ins, 46 x 56 cms





20. Huangshan Looking South  
oil on linen laid on panel, 22 x 14 ins, 56 x 36 cms

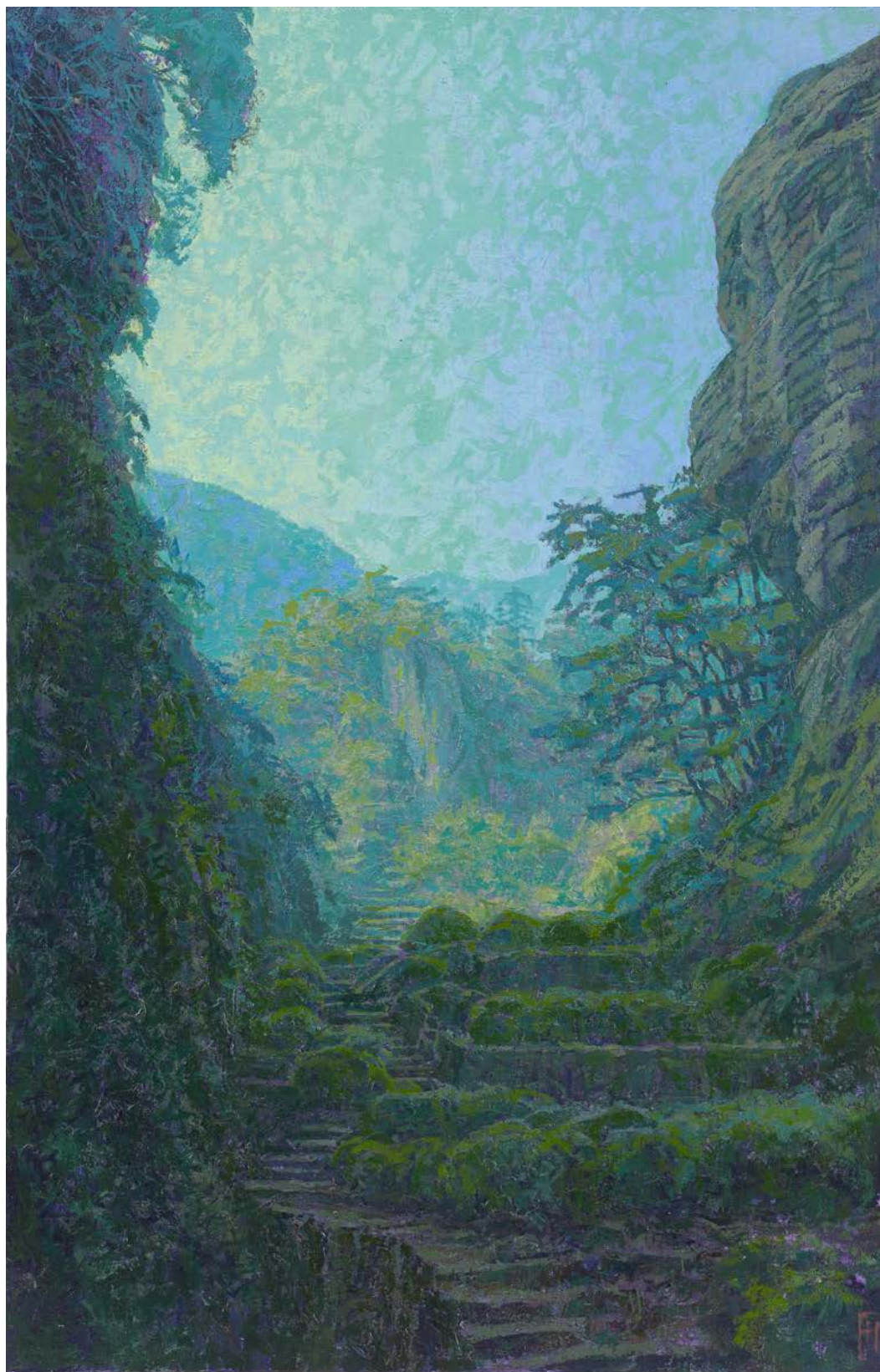


*The usefulness of drawing and painting from life is not so much what you end up making but the fact that you really look at what is in front of you. It forces you into an almost forensic examination of the subject combined with a searing physical engagement with the atmosphere and character of the place that you couldn't really get in any other way and without which I can't make paintings that feel authentic.*

Wuyishan, 29<sup>th</sup> October 2019

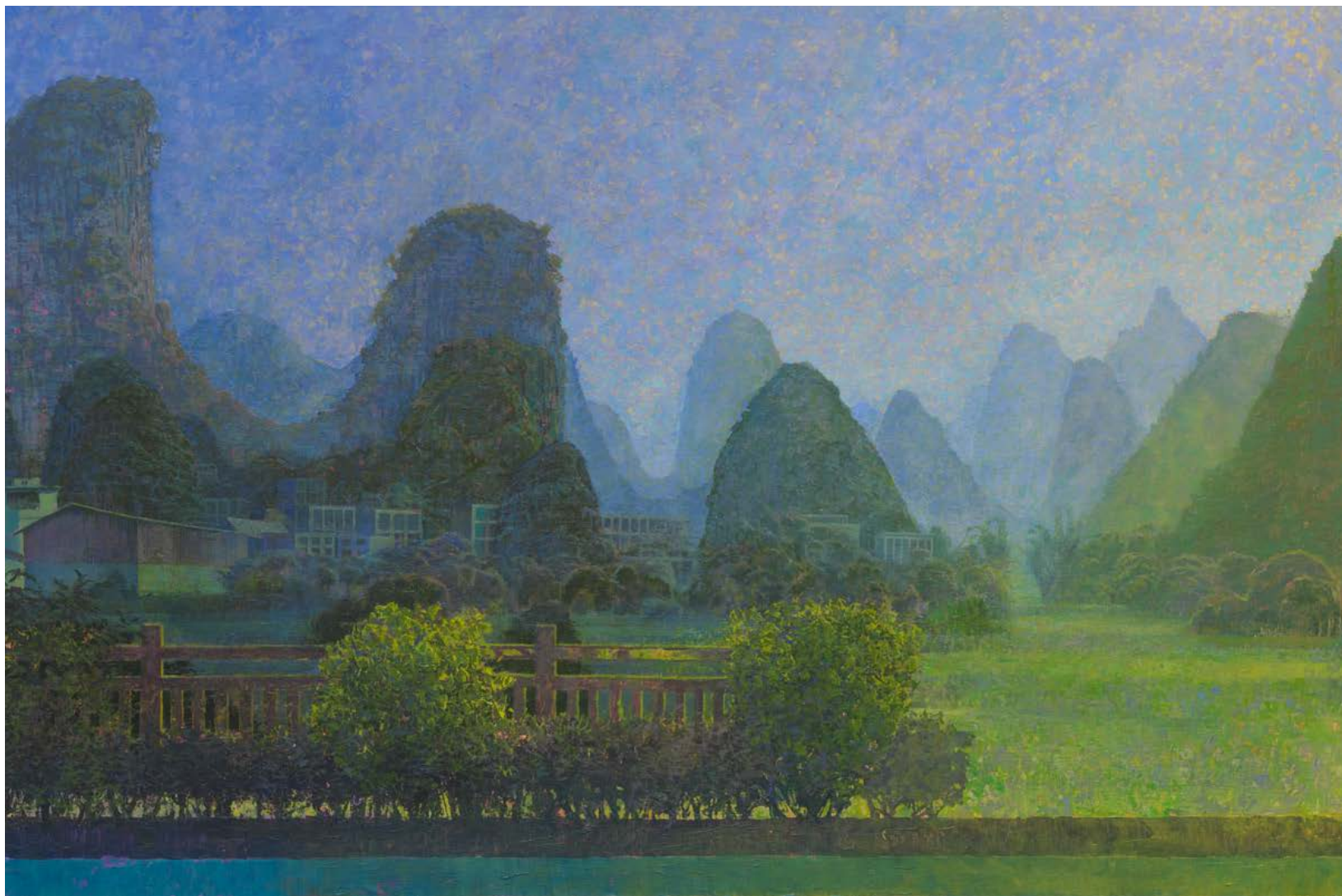
37. Red House, Yangshuo,  
Guilin, (Zhong Dian Eya)  
oil on linen laid on panel  
10 x 11½ ins, 25 x 29 cms





2. Wuyishan (Nanping, Fujian),  
Oolong Tea Plantation, Terraces  
oil on linen laid on panel,  
22 x 14 ins, 56 x 36 cms



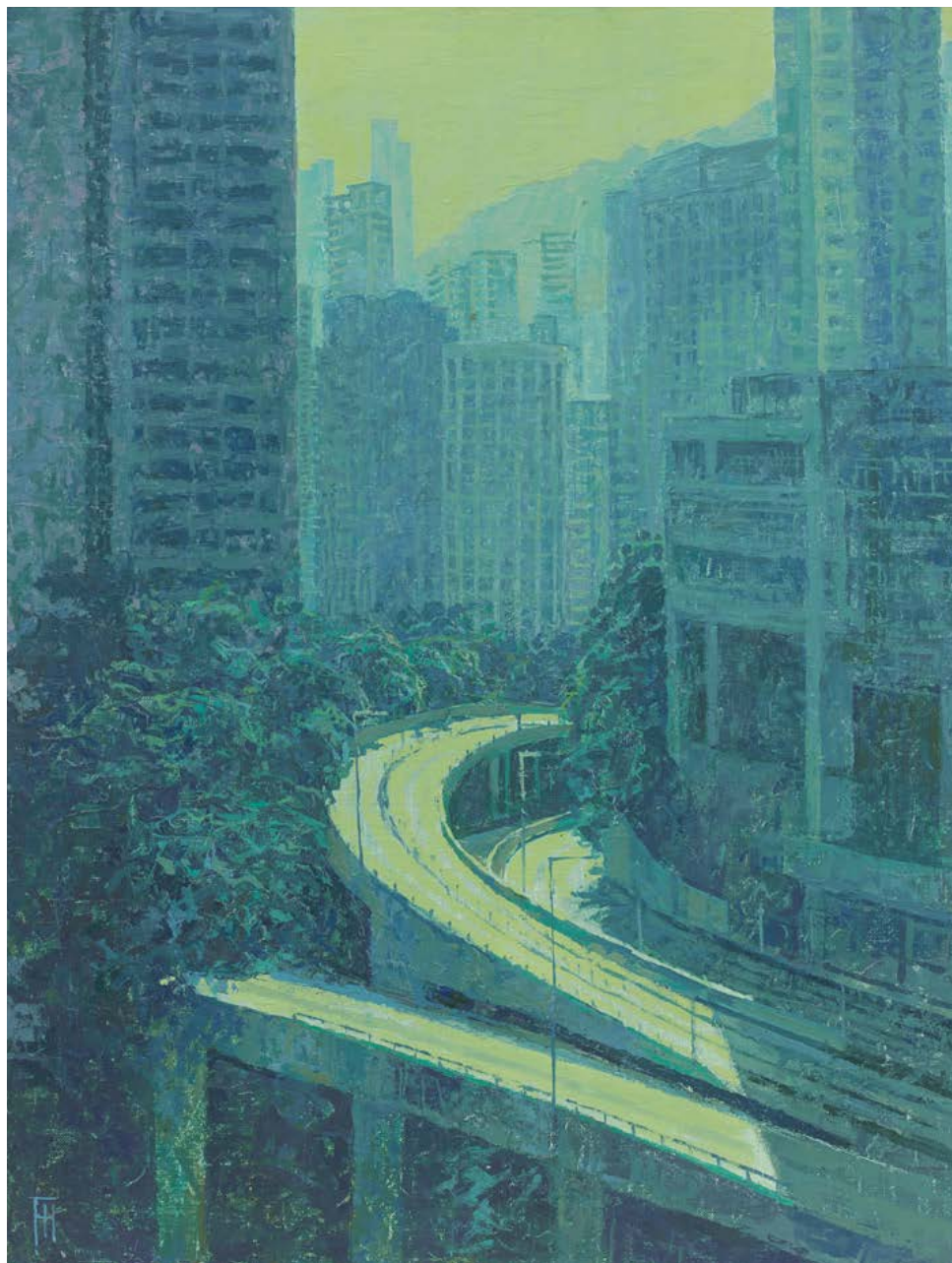


34. The Mountains and the Building, Guilin  
oil on linen laid on panel,  
44 x 68 ins, 112 x 173 cms



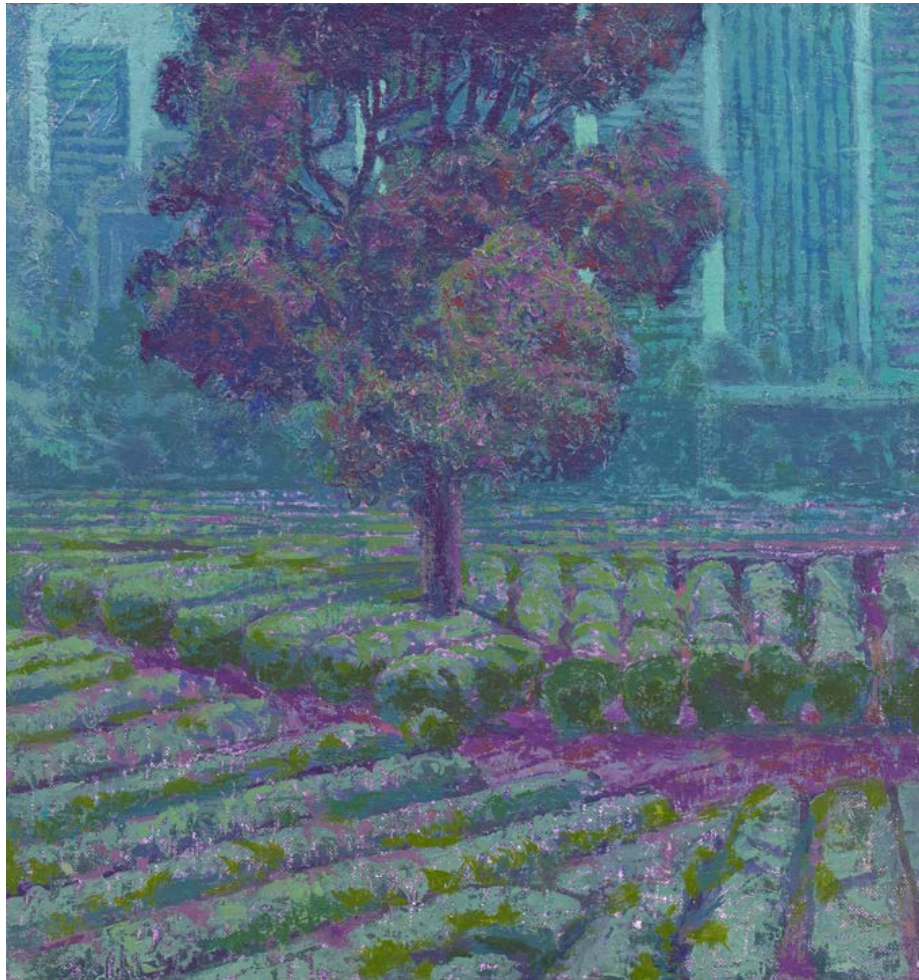


13. Shin Hing Street, Central, Hong Kong  
oil on linen laid on panel  
12 x 11 ins, 28 x 31 cms



12. Hong Kong,  
Mid-Levels, Robinson Road  
oil on linen laid on panel,  
17 x 13 ins, 43 x 33 cms





*Immediately below the hotel was the roof of the dwarfed Roman Catholic cathedral and beyond, the botanical and zoological gardens surrounded by neon lit sky scrapers. The jungle tumbles down from The Peak beyond, curling and crashing down like liquid lichen settling flatly around the bottoms of the buildings, Appropriately, The Bank of China towers over the former governor's residence over on the left. The forest that surrounds the city from above looks as though it could reinhabit the space with vigour given half a chance.*

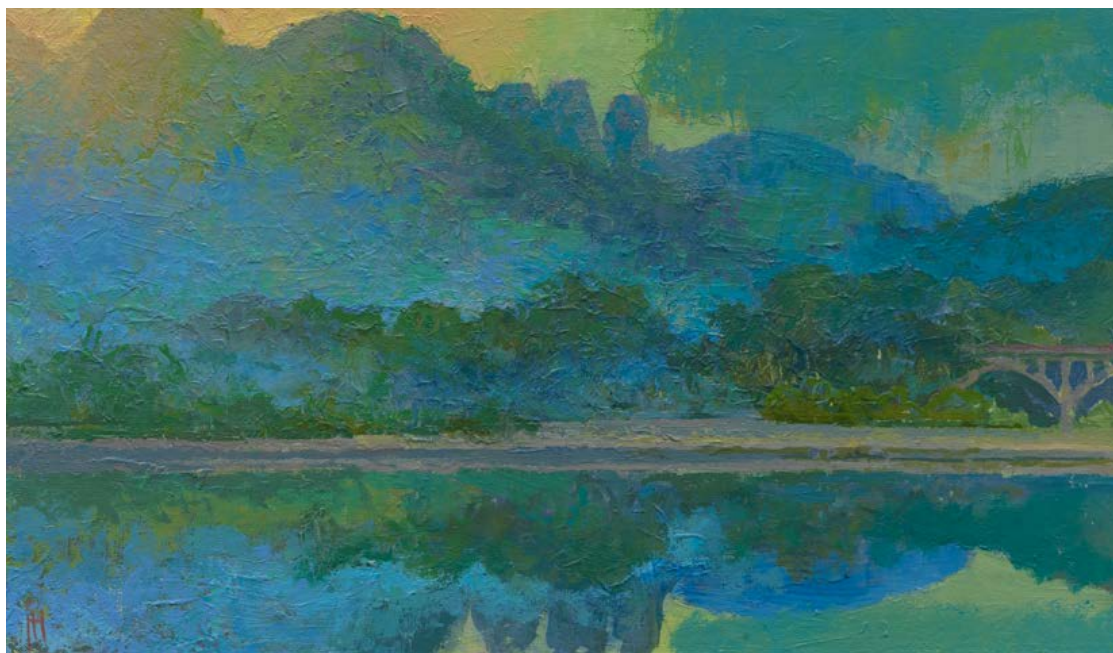
Hong Kong, 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2019

18. Red Tree, Green Tea Plantation. Hangzhou  
oil on linen, 8½ x 8¼ ins, 21 x 22 cms



30. View from Mid Levels over the Botanical Gardens  
oil on linen laid on panel, 22 x 18 ins, 56 x 46 cms





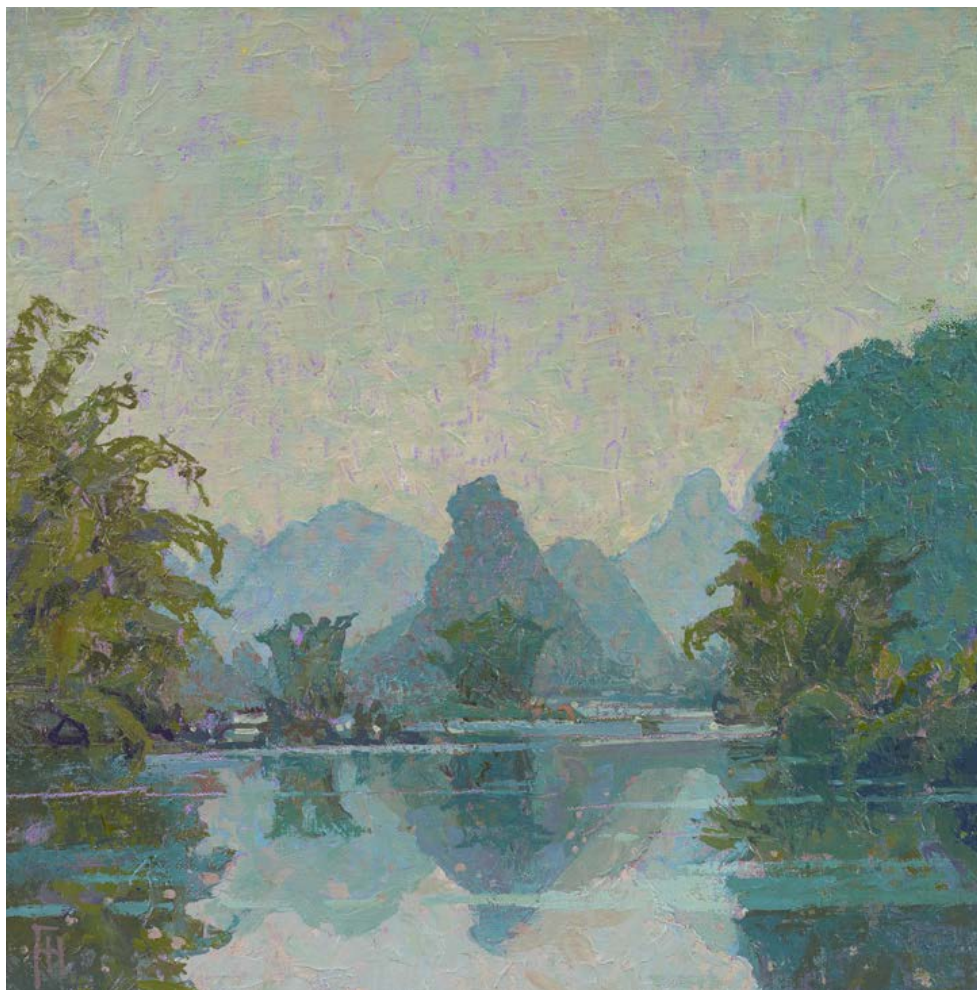
*The view was utterly extraordinary, vast stone facades starting hundreds of feet below and each crowned with a little wood, madly inaccessible and mysterious, the foot of these peaks houses a winding river making a wide wiggling ribbon of cobalt and viridian that forms an inviting flat area to contrast with the vast columns soaring up in front of me. There are a few temples dotted about in the landscape reminding me that the mountains are sacred to the Chinese, places where god and man, mind and body meet .... for me too.*

From Francis Hamel's diary, Wuyishan, 29<sup>th</sup> October 2019



19. Wuyishan, Mountain Study  
oil on linen, 18 x 22 ins, 46 x 56 cms





7. Yulong River, Guilin, Yangshuo  
oil on linen, 8½ x 8¼ ins, 21 x 22 cms



24. The Winding River Near Guilin  
oil on linen, 18 x 22 ins, 46 x 56 cms

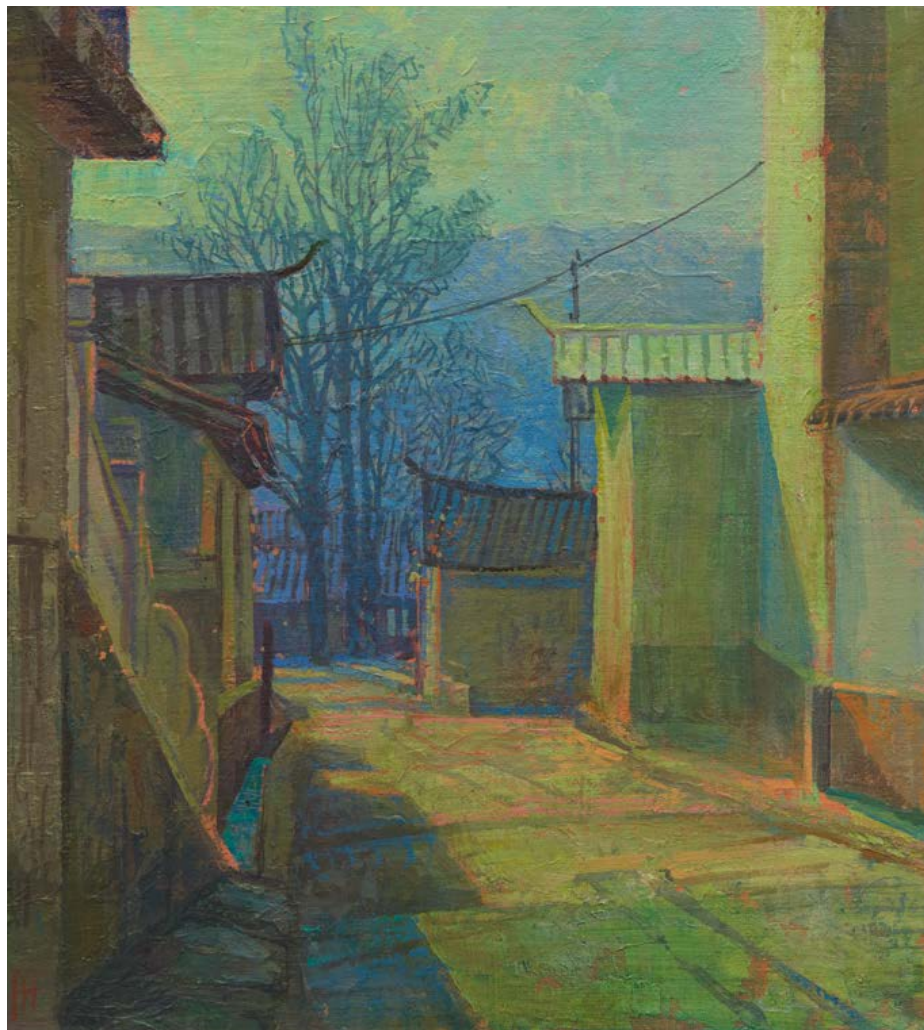




(TOP) 25. Lijiang (Baisha)  
oil on linen laid on panel  
11 x 12 ins, 28 x 31 cms

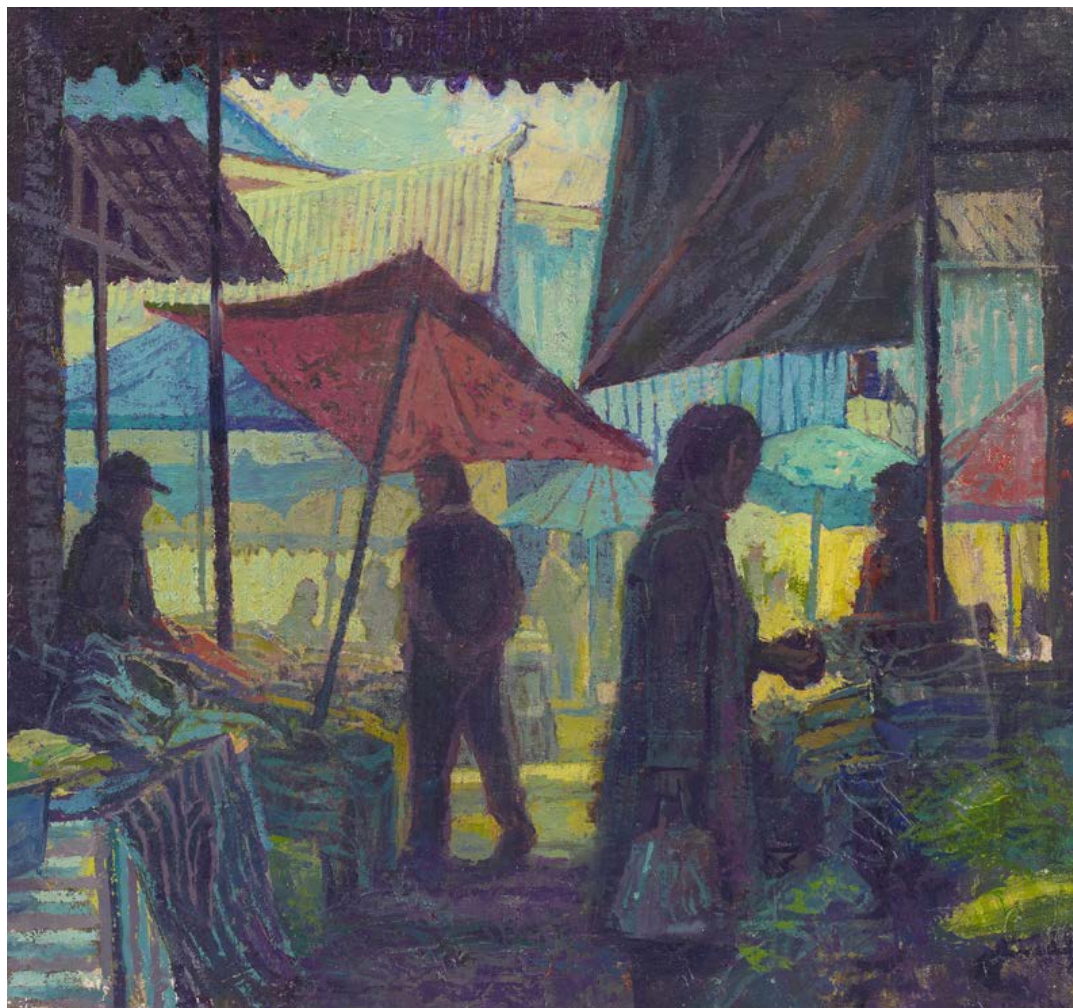


(BELOW) 28. Snowy Mountains in Yunnan,  
Xiao Zhong Dian  
oil on linen laid on panel,  
7½ x 8¼ ins, 19 x 21 cms

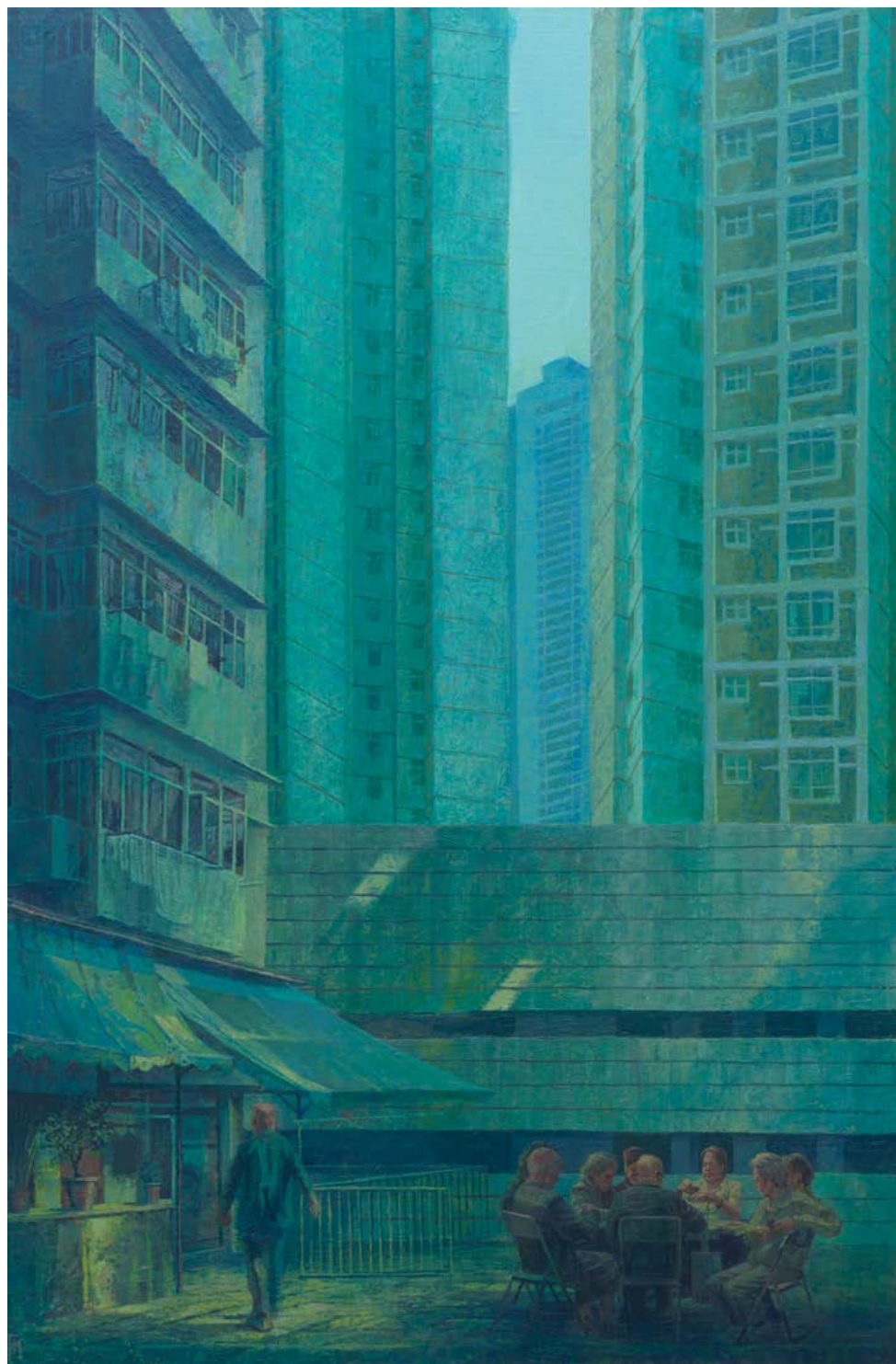


39. Shaxi, Sanlian Village, Yunnan  
oil on linen laid on panel,  
12 x 11 ins, 31 x 28 cms





5. Zhang Yi Market, Lijiang  
oil on linen laid on panel  
11 x 12 ins, 28 x 31 cms



31. Game of Cards, Yik Cheong Building,  
Quarry Bay, Hong Kong.  
oil on linen, 48 x 32 ins, 122 x 81 cms





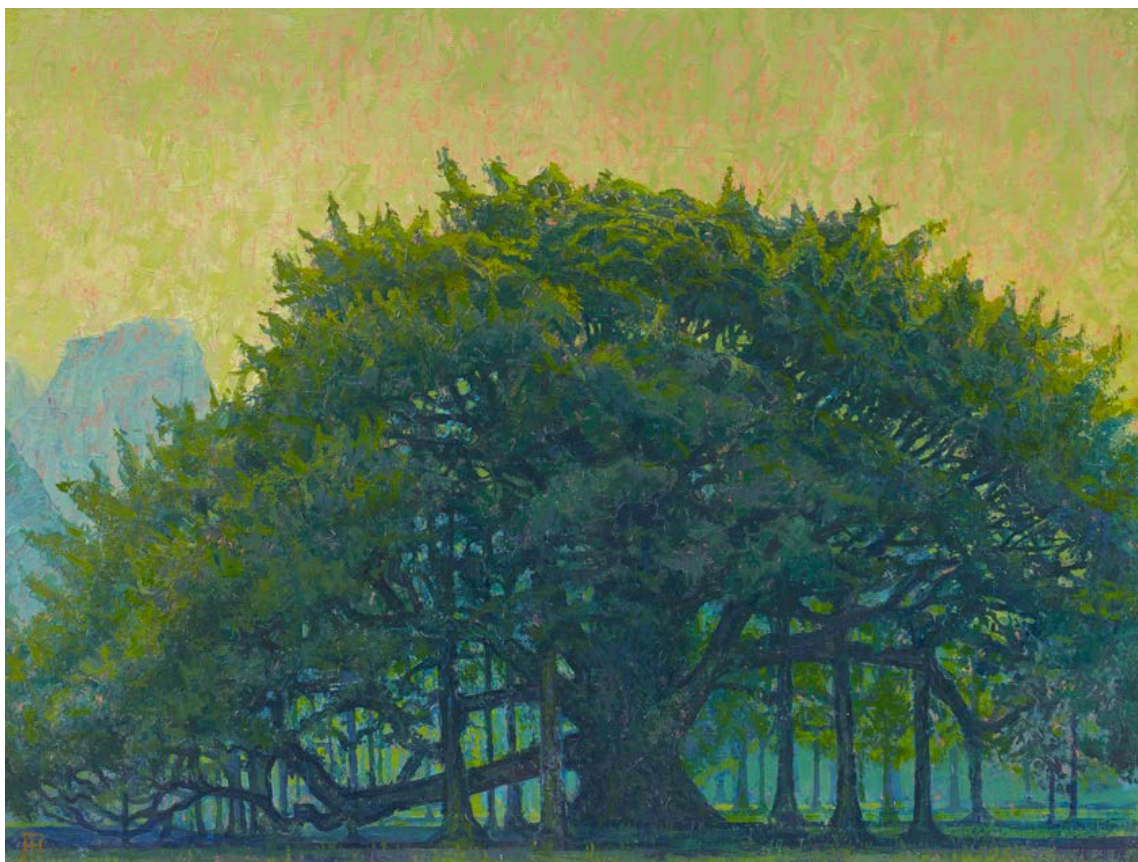
8. Guilin Yangshuo. View from the Kumquat Orchards.  
oil on linen, 11 x 12 ins, 28 x 31 cms



*I hooked up with my new friend from Huangshan, Randy Mo. He sounds like a character from a Raymond Chandler story but is in fact a dealer in oddly shaped minerals and an amateur ink painter. I had some reservations about this, I hardly know him, he speaks little English and there's always a slight fear of the unknown but he seemed really nice and whatever happened it would be different. He arrived in an ancient minibus, the passenger seat appeared not to be attached to the floor and the door wouldn't shut. We headed off, Randy on the phone and diving in the middle of the road or on the left....the convention in China is to drive on the right... Eventually he pulled up at a lay-by with a chap selling Kumquats sitting next to a huge number of beehives. The view was stupendous...nice to be high up and looking down on the pointy madness of the landscape. I took my kit down a dirt track away from the lay-by, passing groups of chatty ladies busy picking the little orange fruits. I found a good view and got started. Randy had brought his paper and inks and sat cross legged next to me and started too. He watched me a lot and was very surprised that I chose to include buildings and roads and at how much time I spent looking at the landscape. He rarely looked up from his paper and ink while he was working. I managed a marriage of two forms of perspective, European and Chinese and two forms of landscape with the built bits anchoring and directing the wilderness. This will make a good big painting I think.*

*Guilin/Yangshuo, 12<sup>th</sup> November 2019*





9. Thousand Year-Old Banyan Tree, Yangshuo, Guilin  
oil on linen laid on panel, 13 x 17 ins, 33 x 43 cms

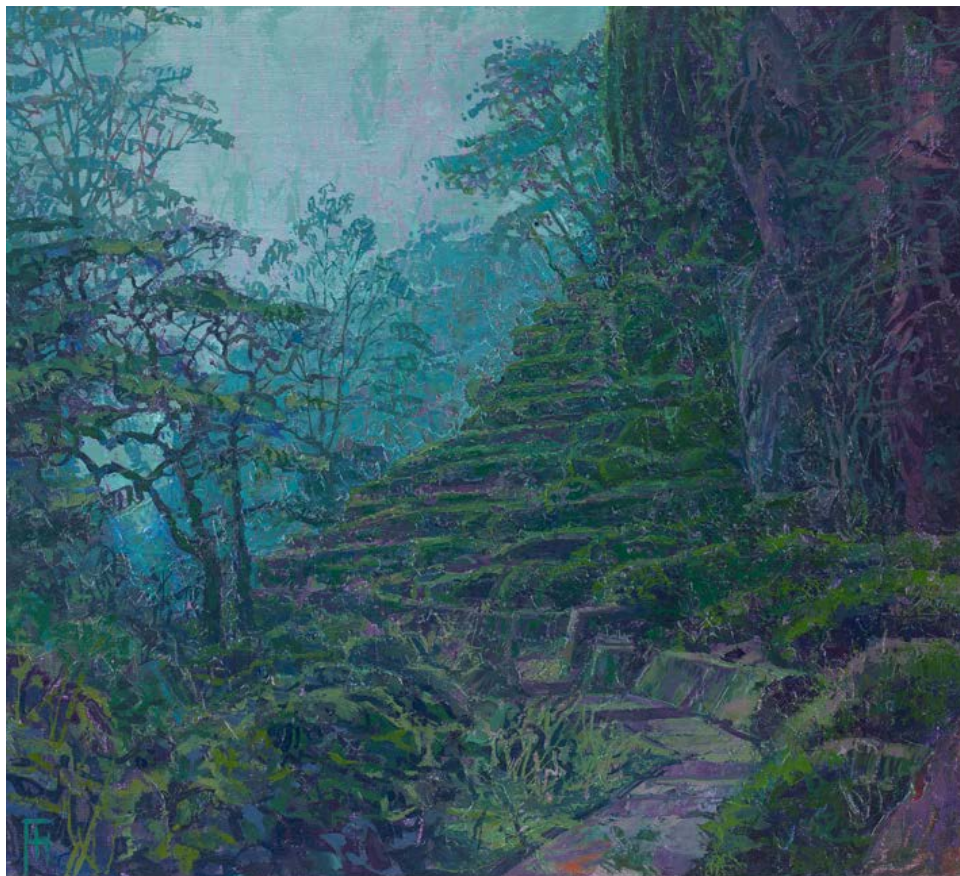


*The Thousand Year Old Banyan owes its fame to Liu Sanjie, a famous singer of the Zhuang Ethnic Group. A Chinese film about her called "Third Sister Liu" was partly shot here in the 1960s. It was under this tree that Liu Sanjie threw an embroidered ball to her lover Aniu, sang with him and declared her love. For this reason the tree is regarded as a "Love Tree". Now thousands of people come to the "Love Tree" to pray for a happy relationship.*

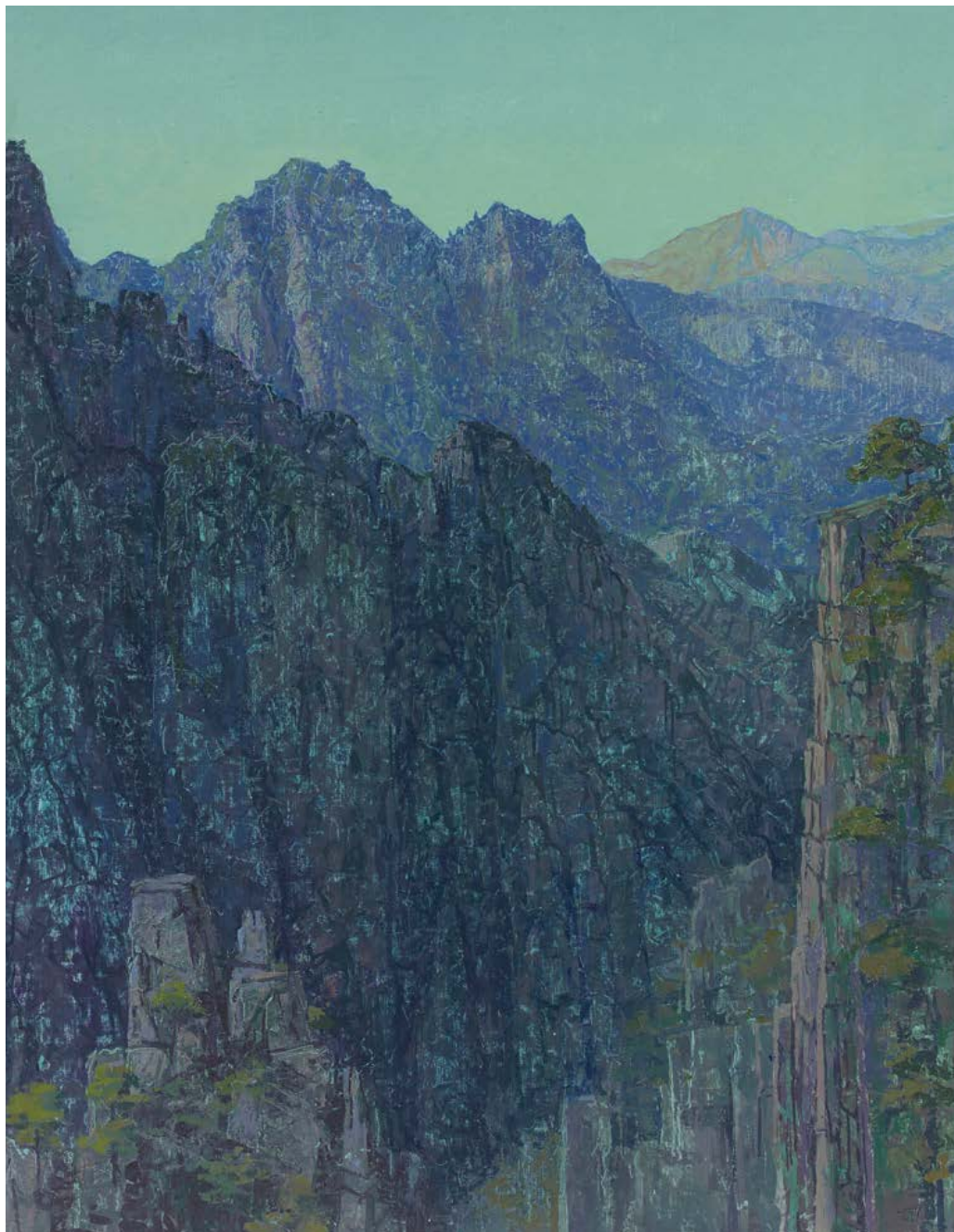
*Yangshuo, 14<sup>th</sup> November*

23. The Love Tree. Thousand Year Old Banyan in Yangshuo.  
oil on linen laid on panel, 16 x 48 ins, 41 x 122 cms



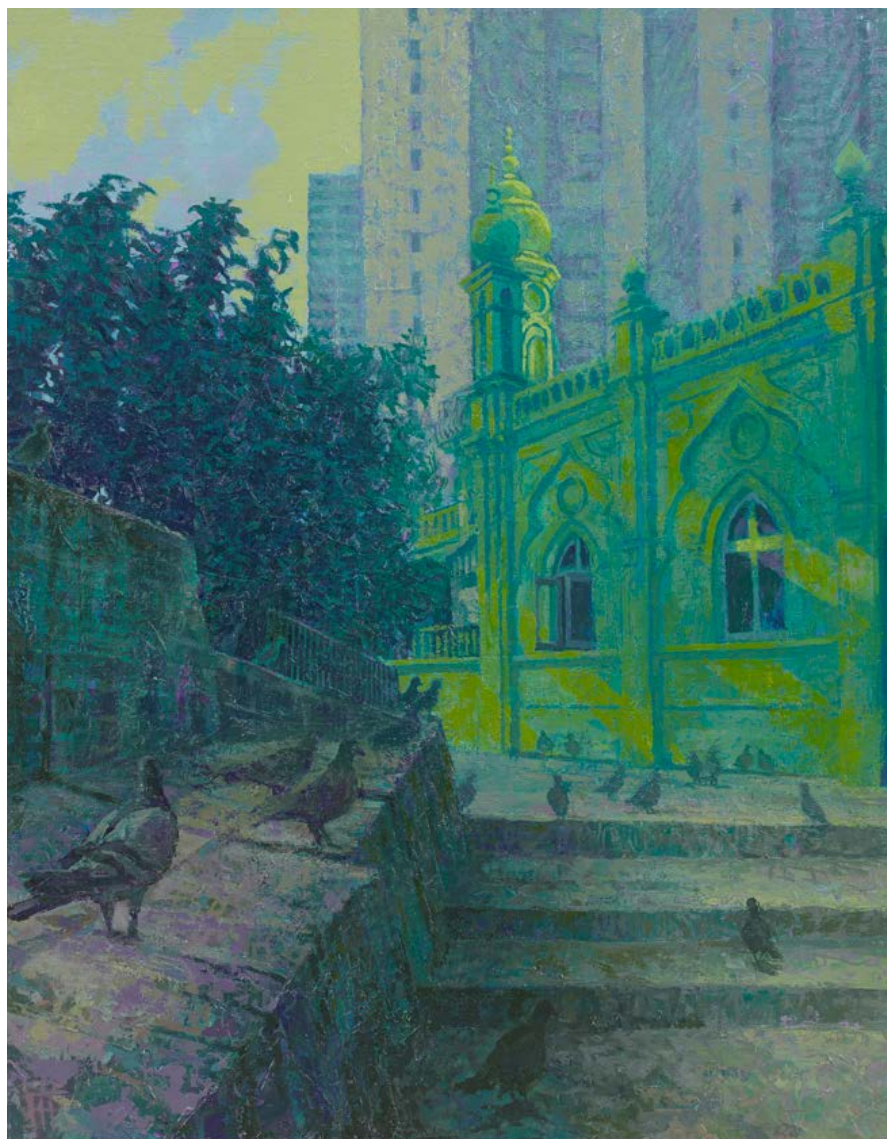


1. Wuyishan (Nanping, Fujian),  
Oolong Tea Plantation  
oil on linen laid on board  
11 x 12 ins, 28 x 31 cms



10. Huangshan, The Yellow Mountain  
oil on linen laid on panel  
22 x 18 ins, 56 x 46 cms



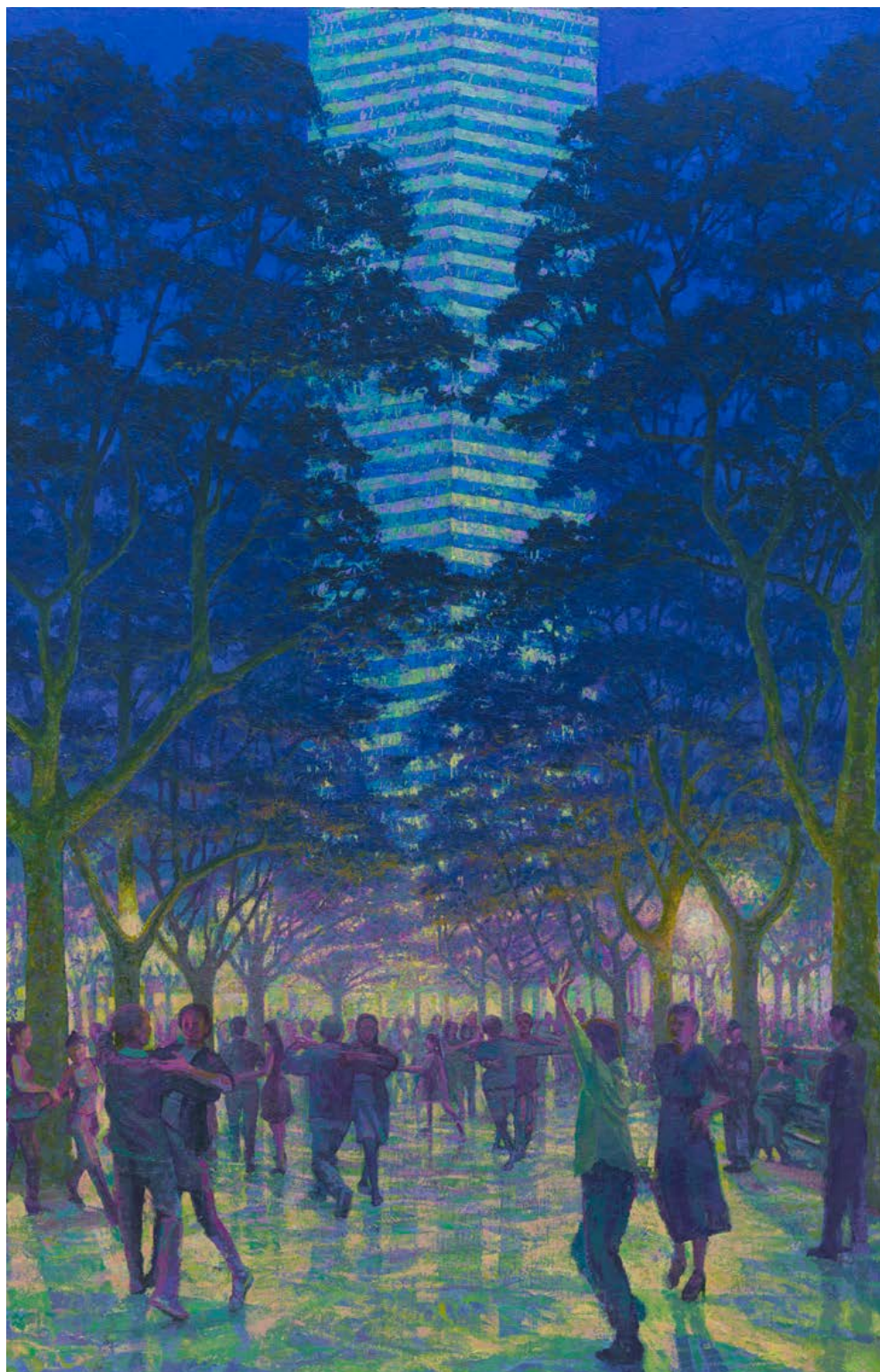


17. The Jamia Mosque, Hong Kong  
oil on linen laid on panel, 17 x 13 ins, 43 x 33 cms

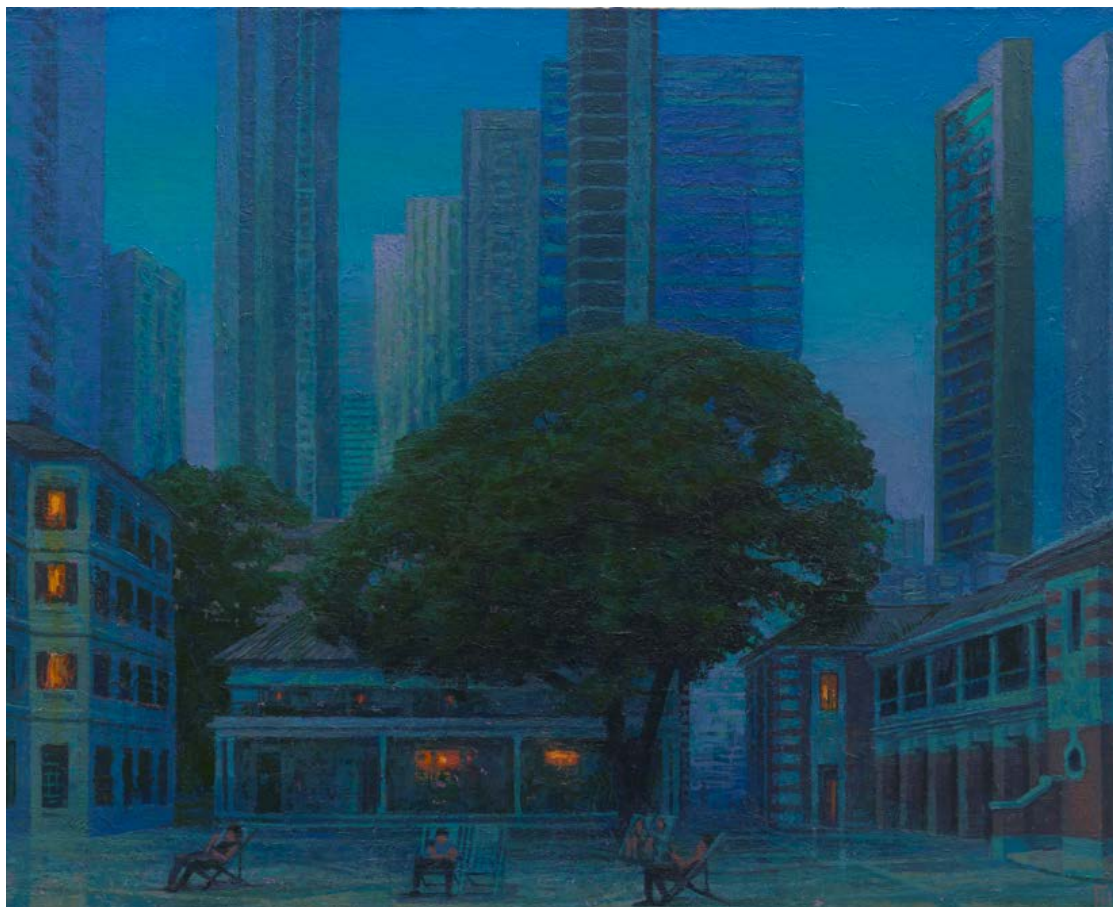
*The neighbouring park was full of couples dancing. A wide thoroughfare down the centre of the park, framed with pollarded Plane trees was paved shinily and home to three small sound systems playing exotic music as couples danced in the open air. Between the trees were benches filled with admiring friends or people who had just come to watch. It was a touching sight. What a lovely way of exercising, communing and not spending any money. I spent some time drawing the dancers and thinking about how this might translate into a bigger painting. Seurat would have loved this scene too. Everyone seemed very content dancing in the warm October evening, just as I was drawing the scene.*

Shanghai, 27<sup>th</sup> October 2019

32. Dancing in Shanghai  
oil on linen,  
48 x 32 ins, 122 x 81 cms







36. Mango Tree in Tai Kwun, Hong Kong  
oil on linen, 22 x 18 ins, 56 x 46 cms

## *Biography*

Francis Hamel divides his year between studios in Oxfordshire and Le Marche in central Italy. He was born in 1963 and trained at The Ruskin School of Art where he now teaches a weekly life-drawing class during term time.

Hamel's work encompasses a wide range of interests including still life, monumental tree paintings, the circus, theatre and portraits and is always grounded in the close observation of a subject through drawing and preliminary oil studies. A central element to Hamel's art for over thirty years has been his fascination with the landscape, both in its wild state and its enduring presence as it is tamed through farming, landscaping, gardening and city building.

Alongside his exhibited work, Hamel has undertaken numerous site-specific commissions which include work on permanent display in Fortnum and Mason, the Victoria Palace Theatre and Wyndhams Theatre. In 2019 Francis exhibited a collection of 28 portraits of leading figures in film and theatre at The Victoria and Albert Museum in London together with a collection of his theatre paintings. The exhibition was accompanied by the publication of a 215-page book *Francis Hamel. Paintings and Drawings*, with essays by Sir Richard Eyre, Professor Niall Ferguson, Colin Harrison, Joanna Kavannah, John Martin and Rosy Runciman

## Selected Solo Exhibitions

2019	Theatre Portraits, The Victoria and Albert Museum, Prince Consort Gallery.
2017	A Certain Tree, John Martin Gallery
2015	Le Marche, Umbria and Tuscany, John Martin Gallery
2014	Rachel's Flowers, John Martin Gallery Chelsea, London
2012	Oxford Paintings, John Martin Gallery, London and Magdalen College, Oxford
2011	Paintings, Studio d'Arte Lanza, Verbania, Italy
2011	Edward Cutler Gallery, Milan, Italy
2010	Italian Formal Gardens and Their Landscapes, John Martin Gallery, London
2009	Theatre Paintings, John Martin Gallery at Art London, Chelsea
2008	Three Years in the Italian Marches, John Martin Gallery, London
2007	Paintings, John Martin Gallery, London
2004	Paintings, John Martin Gallery, London
2004	Oxford Paintings, The Said Business School, Oxford
2003	Work 2002-2003, John Martin Gallery, London
2002	Francis Hamel, John Martin Gallery, London
2000	Francis Hamel, John Martin Gallery, London
1997	Francis Hamel, John Martin Gallery, London
1995	Francis Hamel, John Martin Gallery, London

## Selected Collections

The Ashmolean Museum, Fortnum and Mason, Goldman Sachs  
HRH The Prince of Wales, Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford University Press  
Rolls Royce, Sir Cameron Mackintosh, St John's College Oxford.  
Stephen Sondheim, The Noel Coward Theatre, Wyndham's Theatre.  
The Prince of Wales Theatre, The Victoria Palace Theatre  
The Sondheim Theatre



Digital catalogue printed for the exhibition  
Francis Hamel, *Painting the Yellow Mountain*

John Martin Gallery, London  
5–24 October 2020

The Hong Kong Club (selected work)  
12–29 November 2020

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Location photos by Francis Hamel  
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Late Thursdays to 7pm  
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