

# Negative Capability



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Photo © Hydar Dewachi

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# Negative Capability

Negative capability is an ability to accept conditions such as uncertainty, doubt and ones that are unresolved.

Keates, a 19th century poet, came up with the term, stating that this ability is essential for writing poems. He used the term just once in a letter to his brother but it is still referred to frequently to this day and has been a subject of inquiry in many fields including literature, philosophy and psychology, as a highly regarded ability to intentionally remain mentally flexible.

I was struck by this term when I came upon it as it perfectly describes an attitude I endeavour to have when I paint. A state of coping with uncertainty and staying with it, is essential in the creative process. What does it actually mean to remain flexible in your mind? Is it possible to stay completely passive? I do not know to what degree I am able to achieve such states. What am I expecting to catch when I go to a river to fish? Maybe what I am looking for is not fish but a breeze blowing on the river surface or the sound of a passing bicycle. It might even be the smell of a bonfire. Whatever it is that I am seeking, it is a state where I patiently wait for something to profoundly move me.

When writing characters and drawing with sumi (Japanese ink) on paper, I cannot make corrections so I have to live with uncertainty. Often the ink and water freely create forms beyond my expectations. My hand and the brush I am holding, which I think I am in control of, also betray my intentions. True pleasure of painting lies in the thrill of valuing and making use of such mysterious ways and enjoying encountering the unknown. I think dealing with such conditions is the bare minimum of what is required when creating works. This cannot be done without negative capability.

Artists also have to cope with uncertainty when considering artistic expression. What do you want to say through your work? If you have something to say, how do you communicate it? I feel as if I am being put to the test every time I produce work, but I do not know who is testing what? What touches people? In today's world, where there is no certainty in what beauty is or a definitive value system, what do I, as a human being, want to produce and show? I wait for something to come into being on a paper while remaining in an empty state, where neither knowledge nor experience is of any use, while everything remains uncertain and doubtful. Here, I selected works from a vast amount of drawings and paintings that came about as a result of such an undertaking. I hope you too can get a sense of the thrill I experienced while creating them.

London, August 2020

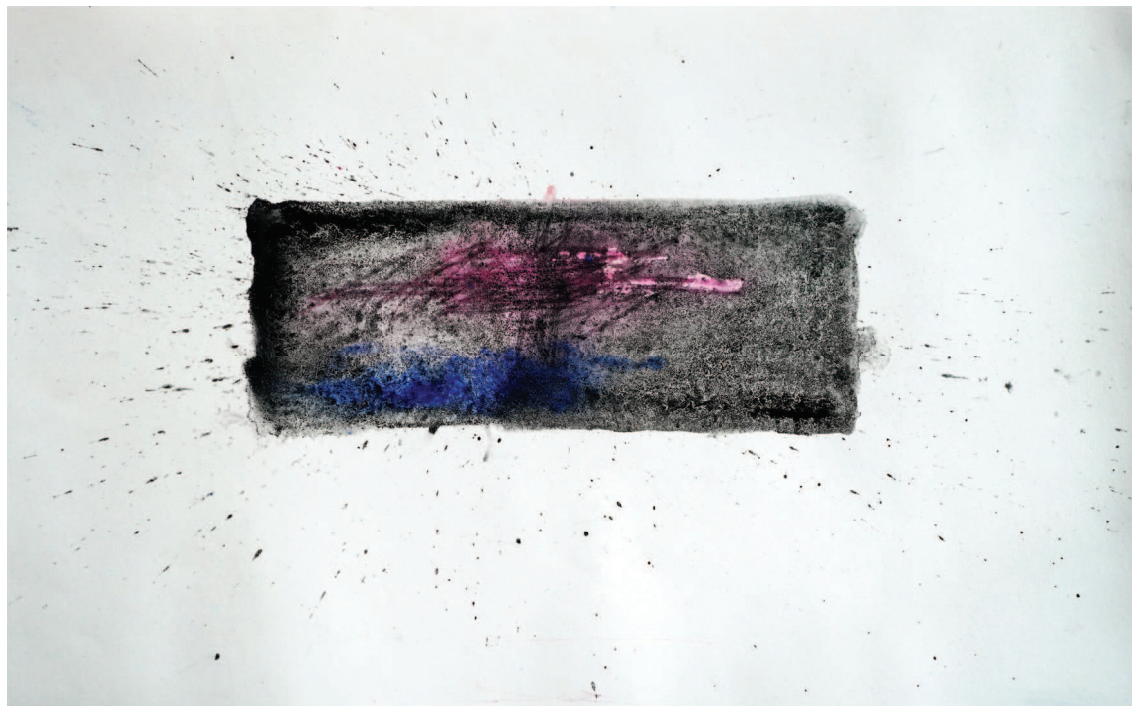
Atsuko Barouh





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● Folded bird, 2017, 453x670mm, Sumi ink on paper





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● Soil, 2016, 450x450mm, Sumi ink on paper



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In, 2016, 480x560mm, Sumi ink on paper ●







星空の観覧車

● Fun fair under the constellations, 2019, 950x1820mm, Sumi ink on paper





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● Mountains, 2017, 453x670mm, Sumi ink on paper