CRAFTING THE CONTEMPORARY IN CHINESE ART

For at least five thousand years, there has been a continuous history of making art in China. The earliest decorated clay and jade fashioned into objects date to the Neolithic period and are testimony to a sensibility in combining form with function, together with a heightened sense of aesthetic. Without a doubt, the imagination and outstanding craftsmanship at this early period, and throughout Chinese art history, reveal a mastery of materials and a reverence for beauty.

Perhaps more than anything, the concept of Yin Yang, or the balancing of opposite forces to create harmony, and the natural world have been the greatest sources of inspiration in Chinese art and culture. Even Chinese writing was said to have been inspired by shapes created in nature. According to legend, the Yellow Emperor's minister Cangjie was charged with inventing a writing system. As a phoenix flew overhead and dropped an object from its beak onto the ground in front of him, it left an impression of a hoof-print. It then occurred to Cangjie that he could capture the essence of things through drawings. The drawings evolved into Chinese writing, which in turn developed into various styles of calligraphy — the highest of all Chinese arts.

From the brushwork of the calligrapher emerged ink painting. Again, nature was a muse and specific genres evolved, such as bird and flower painting along with landscapes. By the late 9th century AD, the Tang Dynasty collapsed into a period of disunity and disillusionment, and cultivated men began to share a longing to commune with nature. Landscape painting flourished, as visions of the natural hierarchy became metaphors for the well-regulated state.

From then on, artists have looked to landscapes to express their feelings. In particular, painters from the literati class formed coteries of like-minded friends to share their passions, friendships and emotions. Rather than paint realistic settings, a distilled visual vocabulary was created to express the values and feelings of the times. Going one step further, imaginary scenes composed of mountains, rocks, waterfalls and trees, called landscapes of the mind or cultivated landscapes, came to express the inner landscape of the artist's feelings.

Another way to reference a landscape was through garden design. A classical Chinese garden is a microcosm of nature, meant to symbolize the harmony between nature and man. Every aspect of the garden, from the architecture to the flora, is intentional and based on the principles of Yin Yang.

Large limestone rocks are an integral element in a classical Chinese garden. They represent mountain and island abodes of Daoist immortals and reference Buddhist cave temples, and are visual shorthand for landscapes. The Tang Dynasty poet BO Juyi (772-846), a devoted student of Chan (Zen) Buddhism, wrote a treatise on the famous limestone rocks sculpted by erosion, which became the most desirable rocks for gardens.

In BO Juyi's time, the status of the rock was elevated to object d'art and was admired for its form, color, perforations, openness, thinness and wrinkles. The rocks were often appreciated in a similar way to the dynamic form, energy, and interplay of negative and positive space created in calligraphy. The smaller version of garden rocks, known as scholar's rocks, became a favorite object for the scholar's desk. BO Juyi[1] wrote:

The famous mountains, the hundred caves and valleys, are all presented by these rocks. Sit there and you can see at a glance a hundred hills spread over a thousand li in a rock the size of a fist.[2]

The works by ZHANG Jian-Jun, ZHAN Wang and WU Xiaowu all share a connection to and reinterpretation of traditional Chinese rocks and literati culture.

ZHANG Jian-Jun re-envisions continuity with the past by using reconstructed artifacts. In his calligraphy series *Ongoing Poem for Thousands of Years*, he uses the ancient Chinese poem *Qian Zi Wen* as a symbol of a traditional cultural form. Participants from different cultural backgrounds and countries combined and continued this poem with him, writing while overlapping in random order, using Chinese calligraphic styles that have existed from ancient times till the present. ZHANG added contemporary punctuation to this poem, which did not exist in the classical Chinese written language, thereby emphasizing change through time.

The current is linked to the past and flows to the future, cultures move and change as time passes.[3] *— ZHANG Jian-Jun*

His sculpture *Mirage Garden #5* combines the beloved ancient material of jade with the symbolism of the garden rock. Made of silicone rubber, it embodies an evolution of the structure of a traditional form and material, mirroring historic changes, as well as the profound current changes taking place in China's societal landscape.

ZHAN Wang's *Artificial Rock No. 135* echoes a similar sentiment. By incorporating the traditional into the contemporary, ZHAN is at once holding on to the past while finding relevance for it in China's meteoric rise to modernity. The ebb and flow of Yin and Yang are at hand, contrasting and complementing the traditional with the contemporary, the natural with the artificial. Amid the landscape of China's shiny skyscrapers, the artist endeavors to literally hold on to the core of tradition by wrapping the limestone rocks in sheets of stainless steel and hammering until the steel takes the shape of the rock. He then removes the sheets and welds them together. The hollowness, together with the polished surface, may be a reflection on the often-criticized materialistic and superficial culture in China today and elsewhere.

[1] BO Juyi is also sometimes spelled BAI Juyi or PO Chü-I.
[2] HU, Kemin and Thomas S. Elias. *Spirit Stones*. New York: Abbeville Press, 2004.
[3] ZHANG Jian-Jun, artist statement via email, March 20, 2016.

A less ostentatious commentary about the fleeting world surrounding Chinese society in these fast-paced times is WU Xiaowu's *Stone #1*. Drawing on the artist's childhood fascination with rocks he collected in a river near his home in Hunan Province, he writes

"Hidden in water, reserving water
Mountains are hidden in water, water is hidden in mountains
Mountains reserve water, water reserves mountains
Life, hidden in water, also reserves and relies upon water
In water it is reborn and circulates." [4] —WU Xiaowu

WU Xiaowu's mountains become fused with rocks and water, essential elements in a Chinese landscape painting. Pushing the boundaries of his combined training in Chinese ink painting and photography, he adds yet another layer — that of oil painting — to create a still life floating between tradition and modernity.

The natural world is reinterpreted in yet another way by WU Yiming in his triptych *Three Trees 3*. His career as a painter has led him to attempt to reconcile the visual language and spirit of traditional Chinese landscape painting with his understanding of realism, abstract art, and expressionism in Western art history. In *Three Trees 3*, he is channeling the high-minded spirit and camaraderie of the ancient literati painters, together with a sense of playfulness, as though they are three friends enjoying a breeze. He turned to potted plants, a humble subject matter found in his studio and in common places, to further emphasize finding innate beauty in the nature that surrounds us. WU Yiming's tribute to the landscape genre and ink painting, reimagined in oil paint, opens up possibilities to engage the past with the present.

Ironically, the original intention behind introducing oil painting into China was quite the opposite. It was integrated into Chinese art schools in the 1950's as a means to disengage with the past and offer a new medium for artists to express themselves in a modernizing China. Socialist Realism from the Soviet Union was primarily taught. Oil painting has come a long way since then, especially in the past twenty years. Artists working with this medium, often in unconventional ways, are at the forefront of the Chinese art world.

XU Zhen has emerged as one these artists, at the moment when contemporary Chinese art has become completely part of the contemporary art conversation.[5] His polyvalent artistic output is always peppered with absurdity, humor, and generally parodies the global art market, as well as China's supposed national accomplishments within the global arena. His work *Under Heaven* hits on all of these points. Spoofing on abstract painting, it is a

[4] Elaine, Jamie, quote from "Reservoirs-Wu Xiaowu," accessed May 25, 2016, https://hammer.ucla.edu/blog/2014/05/reservoir-wu-xiaowu/

[5] "Xu Zhen & Armory Focus: China /Art 21," published March 6, 2014, accessed May 25, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JOv7r0r4y-U

very colorful and textured work made from oil paint squeezed out of a pastry tool used for making icing.

The title references Jeff Koon's *Made in Heaven*, a series that blurs the boundaries between fine art and pornography, and the commercialization of art. The title also conjures up the Chinese concept of "All Under Heaven," being the realm controlled by the emperor. XU's composition is also interpreted as an aerial view of one of China's mega cities, which are considered national achievements.

LI Zhenwei responds to the contemporary world in a more contemplative way. Going beyond his training in classical Chinese painting and his studies in Western art, he sought innovative ways to bridge his background with the impact of technology and mathematics. The result is an optical hypnotic effect of colorfully textured oil paint, based on the dot.[6]

"Everything is made of dots, every line, shape, and mass. The dot holds all the possibilities and complexities of life and art." [7] —LI Zhenwei

The Chinese brushwork he learned earlier on has been abandoned by applying the paint from the tube directly onto the canvas, in what might appear to be random patterns. However, the myriad of dots and their relationship to each other are intentional and calculated. The never-ending sequences are curtailed only by the size of the canvas but their possibilities are infinite.

Not all contemporary Chinese artists were able to start their careers with such freedom of thought. Those who lived through Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution (1966-76), now referred to as a decade of chaos and utter destruction of anything cultural and intellectual, emerged scarred. Most of the art created in the 1980's and 1990's struggles with Mao's madness in one way or another. Some artists attempt to diffuse his power by portraying his face in amusing ways, while others transform the propaganda of the times into political pop or a type of nostalgia.

LI Songsong was born in Beijing in 1973, toward the end of the Cultural Revolution. Growing up in the city that was the center of Mao's power and being from a military family, it would seem inevitable that his upbringing would have been affected. As an artist, he stands out among his peers by collecting and recollecting images from China's revolutionary era.

His painting *Dog Walking* depicts a man dressed in a Mao jacket and military hat, with a touch of revolutionary red. He is walking a dog, with snow-capped mountains in the

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[6] "Li Zhenwei," accessed May 25, 2016, http://www.telescope-beijing.com/li-zhenwei.html

[7] Ibid

background that are painted partially in color and also in black and white. The subdued palette sets a nostalgic tone and the blurred imagery leaves a sense of something about to be forgotten.

Perhaps this is a reference to walking a path between two worlds. It is not clear if the scene is meant to depict the past or to remind viewers that there was such a destructive past in China's recent history. For most of LI's generation, China's economic boom has been all they have known and all consuming, with no looking back.

With both feet firmly planted in the present, YU Honglei is comfortable incorporating references to Western art, Chinese art, music, and digital technology. His video *Take a Walk*, takes the viewer on a brisk whirl through an eclectic cultural space of the mind. Like a stream of consciousness, seemingly random images are cut-and-pasted on the screen, and quickly slide past by. Each image is up for only a second before another appears, not always in a logical sequence but long enough to offer food for thought and allow the viewer to connect the dots. The video is a lens into the frenetic art world of the artist, as he maneuvers through it with ease.

An entirely different lens is that of photographer HAI Bo. He was trained in printmaking and then focused on oil painting, which he eventually found limiting. The camera offered a means to better express the themes that compel him. However, he doesn't think he is a professional photographer. Most of the time he says he looks upon the camera as a paintbrush and uses it as such.

"I hope to create works that are simple, unaffected, environmentally friendly, and that can be understood at a glance."

"The emotions and thoughts that I have experienced at every moment in my life - is the most essential strength behind my artistic works. For example, that moment when I am drinking perfect alcohol with my friends to our hearts content, or a foggy morning when no one is around."[8] —HAI Bo

HAI Bo was raised in Northeastern China, formerly known as Manchuria, a region far from the action of Beijing or Shanghai. The rural landscape is arid and vast, and a sense of heaviness lingers in the air. *The Northern No. 6, Eastern Artistic Conception* and *Shadow-3* are representative of his photographs from this region, with a feeling of desolation and sadness.

An unexpected turning point came while on a journey to the southern part of China, along the Yangzi River. The exquisite landscape of the south that inspired ancient Chinese landscape painters has also made an impact on HAI Bo. There, he discovered a source he had been searching for.

[8] XI, Sheng and Yuan YUAN. "I Am Concerned with the Source of the Water, Not the Water Itself," from the transcript of an interview provided by HAI Bo.

His monumental work *The Blind* was shot by the ancient city wall in Jingzhou, Hebei Province, along the Yangzi River. The wall itself has a history of two thousand years and was last rebuilt during the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). Jingzhou's historical significance was immortalized in one of China's most famous novels *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, familiar to every Chinese. The blind fortune-tellers seated at the base of the wall offer advice and guidance to a younger generation.

HAI Bo asks, "who is really blind?" This convergence of young and old people coming together at an ancient monument in a modernizing city captures so much of what China is all about at this moment…the weight of a long history, uncertainty about the future, and the need for direction in a society lacking a spiritual compass.

Regardless of the times, China has always been rich in artistic inspiration for both Chinese and Western artists. Breaking all boundaries was the 18th century Jesuit Giuseppe Castiglione, who became a Qing Dynasty court painter. He excelled in traditional Chinese ink painting, eventually marrying his Chinese brushwork with his classical training in European painting. For artists who have a destiny with China, their work is profoundly imbued with a Chinese aesthetic and sensibility, and the imprint of traditional Chinese culture is undeniable.

Michael Cherney is at once a photographer and Chinese art historian, as versed in classical Chinese art, literature and culture as the literati of the past. He reaches into China's long history and re-captures the spirit of a China long gone. Through his photography, he engages with traditional Chinese ink painting by cropping his images and mounting them in a way that resembles ink paintings. In so doing, he creates a new context and dialogue for photography and traditional ink painting in contemporary times.

"When it comes to clarifying the work to an audience, the fact that the work defies simple categorization in many ways can be quite frustrating: photography versus the painting aesthetic; history versus the present moment; the question of my own identity. Yet the work itself certainly benefits from this. When creating art, I simply find inspiration in a certain aesthetic, a rich history, and, most important, in nature, which bestows its gifts in equal measure to all." [9]
— Michael Cherney

The source of photographic imagery in his hand scroll *Song Mountain* is one of China's sacred Daoist mountains. It is also the home of the Buddhist Shaolin Temple, considered the birthplace of Chan (Zen) Buddhism in China, and renowned for martial arts. As the frames in the scroll are unraveled, preferably by hand in an intimate setting with like-minded friends, the feeling of traveling through a traditional Chinese ink landscape

[9] Michael Cherney, "Engaging with Tradition: A Conversation with Michael Cherney," published by Trans Asia Photography Review, Volume 3, Issue 2, Spring 2013, accessed July 18, 2016, http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tap/7977573.0003.206?view=text;rgn=main

painting, through the mist and majesty of a sacred space, revives the spirit of the past into our lives.

The confluence of ink painting, nature, Daoism and Buddhism enliven the spirit of Barbara Edelstein's artworks. Her approach allows her to explore and study in tandem the depth and dimensions of Chinese culture in a holistic way, as arts and culture were learned and appreciated by the literati in the past.

Her studies in brushwork have been inspired by *gongbi*, which translates literally as "meticulous brush," as well as the free-flowing brush and philosophy associated with Daoism.

"The Daoist idea that people and other creatures and nature are all one, and connected, is also an influence upon my artwork and life. To study and practice something over a period of years, until the action and the consciousness of the practitioner are one, and the action becomes

unconscious, has been my way of working. I will take a material or a form and work with it in my artwork until I am that material or form, at that point I can express my heart and thoughts absolutely directly."[10] —Barbara Edelstein

Reflections is a series of photographs and ink paintings in a dialogue of contrasting perspectives on nature. The photographs rely on her eye and the camera to capture the abstraction in her subject matter, while the paintings are an expression of her inner landscape of emotions transmitted through the brush. They reflect the combined *qi*, or vital energy force, of the artist with nature. Together and juxtaposed, the works draw attention to the subtle details and beauty in nature, which often go unnoticed. Here, we come full circle. The natural world that has so distinctively inspired Chinese artists for millennia is as much a source of inspiration for Western artists who have come to embody Chinese heritage in their work.

Whether it is the angst that comes from within a culture undergoing tremendous transformation or the gravitation pull toward an ancient culture that is being eclipsed by modernization, China has always been, and continues to be, a vessel of inspiration for artists. The art on view in the Ahmanson Collection reveals a deep appreciation for the on-going artistic tradition in China, by recognizing the innovation and ingenuity in crafting the past into contemporary works that resonate with China, and the world, today.

France Pepper
Founder and Director
China Insider

[10] Edelstein, Barbara. *Story*. Shanghai: Mingyuan Art Center, 2010.