

“These fragments I have shored against my ruins.” T.S. Eliot **The Waste Land**

It may seem odd to quote a great American modernist poet (born 1888) to help understand the striking 80s work of Qiu Deshu, a Chinese artist born in 1948, at the cusp of New China. But the crisis of tradition and the individual talent that T.S. Eliot's line alludes to, the poet's sense that all he has to make poetry with are fragments of a great culture, might have been written to describe the art that Qiu Deshu made in the late 70s/80s - among the most ambitious and revelatory bodies of work produced by that seminal generation of Chinese artists who came to maturity in the years after Mao Zedong's death.

Its ambition is inseparable from the artist's recognition that he had to 'construct something/Upon which to rejoice', to quote T.S. Eliot again; he understood that neither of the available options - either the continuation of Chinese traditions of art or the imitation of western styles - could help him to understand either his own self or the historical circumstances in which he found himself. This exhibition offers the visitor an opportunity to see in some detail examples of his remarkable work of the 80s, to watch an artist trying to build from fragments art that can make sense of himself and what is happening.

Born in Shanghai, educated in Chinese calligraphy (he had made a work as a child indebted to Shitao, 1642-1707, which had impressed his teacher), Qiu Deshu had in his earlier years been an enthusiastic Red Guard and a well-regarded worker painter, even going into factories to make representations of their heroic daily life. In the late 1970s, with Deng Xiaoping's Opening Up Qiu Deshu found himself like many others having to wrestle with his new life. The opening up involved a lessening of cultural control too - newly translated books flooded in, a 1979 exhibition from the Boston Museum allowed Qiu Deshu to see the painting of Jackson Pollock. With others, the artist set up the Caocao Group whose watchword was independence. But the word 'independence' had political resonance for the authorities and Qiu Deshu found himself under political scrutiny; and the group banned. This has to be part of any description of the conditions in which the works in **Night and Day** were made. The Opening Up was a moment of turbulent liberation, but one not where there was any consensus how it should be navigated.

While it would be possible to write at length about the conditions in which Qiu Deshu made the late 70s/early 80s work, in the end what matters is the art itself, its quality and meanings. The late 70s/80s work on the walls of the Pearl Lam Gallery shows the artist trying out a variety of languages ('He Do the Police in Different Voices', as the first epigram to TS Eliot's **The Waste Land** had it). The second painting with the wonderfully apt title 'In a Restless World' has an eagle, tiger and hunter and clearly conjures up some elements of classical Chinese painting (the tiger and eagle representing evil forces in the world, as he said in an earlier interview); there are also calligraphic ink works, seal work, work caught between figuration and abstraction with ghostly figures emerging from the paint, as well work made by the fissure technique that Qiu Deshu owns. But too often fissuring is described in formal terms. What matters is what it means. Here the artist's own words help,

These paintings were done during my most difficult time, the time when I was subject to criticism session after criticism session. No one knew when it was going to end, and depending on the outcome, the authorities could have ruined my whole family. That's how I felt. One day I was in the small garden at the back of the Cultural Palace, and saw these cracks on the ground, which looked

*like eyes staring into the sky directly and silently. I felt that my condition was mirrored in these cracks.*¹

Out of this sense of fracture, the fissured work developed. Formally, such works involve drawing with ink on rice paper, tearing it into pieces, adding more paper, painting with acrylic - and so making art out of a complex process of layering. But more importantly they are one of the ways that Qiu Deshu makes works out of fragments – breaking the ‘unbroken lines’ of Chinese traditional calligraphy, constructing something ‘Upon which to rejoice’. Wherever one looks in this exhibition, and not merely at the fissure work, the art is made out of fragments. Take the seal work which Qiu Deshu has said is the self of Chinese culture. First, he says he tried to ease the confinement but ended exploding it. His work is everywhere made out of fragments – even the radical ink painting twists, turns and breaks the idioms of classical ink painting. ‘These fragments I have shored against my ruins’.

But to what end? To explore the inner freedom that the Opening Up had released might be the general answer. Especially during the Cultural Revolution it might be argued that the Party wanted to abolish private life and even the inner life. Perhaps inevitably that repressed landscape became the terra incognita that an artist such as Qiu Deshu wanted to explore once he had the opportunity. His art of this period – late 70s/early 80s – is an exploration of his inner life, constructed out of the fragments available to him. It is called **Night and Day** because, as the artist said to me, during this period, he had both a melancholic and joyful self. Both are captured in the work on display. To view them is a fascinating encounter with the power of painting.

—Philip Dodd

¹ Quoted in an interview between Qiu Deshu and Jane DeBevoise. I am indebted to this interview for several quotations from the artist <http://www.aaa-a.org/programs/conversation-with-qiu-deshu/>.