

I Met a painter. His Name is Michael Chow.

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We never know where, when, and how we are going to encounter painting. It may be on a wall, it may be on the floor, or on the ceiling. It may, sometimes, be on a canvas. It might be art. It might be nature trying to emulate art. It might be neither the one nor the other. But when it happens, it simply does.

It is even more rare to meet a painter—someone who paints. There is something slightly surprising in such a note; after all, aren't paintings exhibited all over the world in fairs, museums, galleries, private homes and public spaces? And these paintings—someone must have made them. Someone must have painted them.

The problem is that painting something is not painting. Producing an object on which there is paint is not painting. Painting as such is something rather different. It is a personal commitment of a body and a soul to bring out all the energy they contain. Furthermore, it lies in the ability to transform that impulse into art—into a work of art. If there is no energy, and if there is no sublimation, then it simply isn't painting. The achievement of painting—its very material possibility—lies in the fulfillment of these two criteria: the one strictly personal, the other transcending the borders of mankind. If one of them is missing, then we may be dealing with something interesting, but not with painting.

So when one meets a painter, and when one encounters painting, it is a pretty extraordinary moment to experience. And yet, it raises many questions: How do you recognise painting? How do you recognise a painter? These questions may seem irrelevant, but they are actually extremely complex, and difficult to resolve.

The first answer would be when you see it, you know it: direct, straightforward evidence. A painter has energy, a sort of youthful liveliness. He smiles, more often than not. Either he stays totally silent, or the flow of his speech cannot be interrupted: the words come out of his mouth, endlessly, discussing issues of art history as well as commenting on the contemporary world.

A painter lives here and now, and yet he spends an important part of his life somewhere else, doing things other than those we humans are accustomed to doing. He has other experiences, intellectually and creatively, and sometimes he likes to share them.

A painter exists in his own space, and yet he connects with the discourse, narratives, and productions of our time. A painter does his own thing, and yet he has a sense of where the world is going, and from where it is going. A painter knows art history, and yet he creates after history and beyond the rules of history.

A painter lives in a studio. He spends some time there, away from his regular life. Only he can enter this sanctuary of painting, and some friends and fellow travellers with whom he agrees to share his journey. The privilege is scarce, and should be respected as such. There is a ceremony of the studio, and ceremonies still matter in the case of intense commitments.

Once you are allowed in, you get to see the works. They are hung on the walls, building conversations of colours, shapes, and materials. You take some distance, go farther, and then closer, and farther, and closer again. From this back and forth movement, you start to get a prismatic impression. You decipher that they all have something in common—they all picture a landscape, as well as strive to challenge and reinvent this long-standing tradition. At that point, while you discover that all these paintings are landscapes, you discriminate the various influences and traditions that lie behind the very fact that they picture such a subject. You see traces of a deep influence exerted by Antoni Tapiés: the fascination with stuff, the imposition of materials on the canvas, the way to abstraction paved

through the addition of concrete realities. Further present is the passion for a landscape filled with details, and yet the depiction of a view that one could at the same time encompass in a glimpse. You also notice a trace of another striking source, which is Monet, and the liquidity of landscape: the fact that a landscape would be permanently fleeing, and could never be grasped as a permanent stable being; the fact that movement pours into the painting, and produces ongoing shifts in its very structure.

From Monet, we start to sense another sign of history: Chinese landscape painting, and the aesthetics of the floating world. The fact that we would at the same time perceive a presence of Tapiés and Monet, of European and Chinese art, might seem puzzling, if not contradictory: indeed, their visions stand opposite the one to the other.

One tendency is based on construction, the other on disruption; one builds monuments, the other relates to the enjoyment of a feeling of instability. And here we are, faced with paintings in which we can sense this twofold legacy. And the paintings stand; they function as artworks. They summarise and feature a remarkable complexity. You can sense the architecture of art history and yet, what you look at is a finished building.

When you see painting, you know it: that is certainly true. But maybe it is a first impression. They are often right, but they might be misleading. A true painting, in the same way as it is the expression of energy, is complex. A painting is part of a system, as much as philosophy can be. From one work to another, we need to be able to feel the evolution, feel the life, and at the same time sense a narrative. A painter who would enjoy evenness would not be a painter. He would be either a civil servant or a conceptual artist. This sense of narrative into the oeuvre itself carries another name: style.

Style is not the permanent repetition of similar features. It is actually the opposite: it is the dynamics, inside of a framework, of painting itself. Style can be sensed on a painting, or from one painting to another. It is either a harmony in a painting or between paintings. Style does not mean perfection. It means perfectibility in achieving a vision, the ability to get closer to the idea, from the mud of the world, from the mud of the previous works.

A painter who wouldn't have style would not be a painter. These are terrifying but essential criteria. After this first experience, after having been able to read the sources, and how they get disrupted and united into one single painting, we are faced with this unavoidable test: do these paintings have style? Something certainly happens in each of them, but does it keep happening from one painting to the other? As we pay attention to the flow from each painting to the other, we start unveiling the narrative that was hidden beneath them.

Things shifted. The more the painter painted, the more straightforward his vision became. At first, he wanted to fill the whole canvas, he wanted to bring stuff everywhere. He wanted to conjure the irrepressible loss of control he was enduring by producing reality. He could not see this reality as anything else but the most precious thing on earth. He added banknotes and silver, everywhere, and gold, at which everybody would look. He wanted the canvas to be made precious. At some point, he was ready for the painting itself to be precious.

As he evolved, he accepted the importance of letting the void enter plenitude, of engaging with the permanent war the two notions, the two painterly moves, fight over on a canvas. We can sense his desire to deal with this tension, to find solutions, as painters do. We can see him accepting whiteness as the condition to colour, accepting the void as another form of fulfillment. We can see him trying new materials—why not an egg? What would it look like? How would it feel? We can see him adapting the early tools he used to construct his painting—less gold, less silver, still some, and the banknotes, less banknotes, but still. We can see the gloves, always present, as a metaphor for the hand that made that painting, the absent hand that made the present painting.

We see how painting unfolds, how materials interact the one to the other, how colours engage in conversations, how white and black play games together, and how violent vivid colours enter the frame—yellow, pink become part of an aesthetic choreography. We decipher the silent negotiations along the lines of the painterly structure, the ongoing tension between explosion and centrality. We see it all happening on the canvas. We discover the moment when painting earns the right to freedom, to quietness within the display of the energy of life.

Recently, I met a painter. His name is Michael Chow. And guess what: for fifty years he didn't paint. And now he's gotten started again.