

## Perfection by Chance—A Yi Pai Series Exhibition

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In the theories of ancient Chinese art and literature, poetry, calligraphy, and painting are regarded as the Three Perfections (*san jue*). Although each “perfection” has its individual virtues, between the three of them are cross-fertilisations that establish relationships of a symbiotic spirituality, or as the Chinese saying goes, “Part of me is in you, and part of you in me.” Thus, art is a creation that incorporates meditation, the concept of words, and visual form. Concept, subjective in character, and visual form are not supposed to go to extremes, whereas meditation is necessary for maintaining an equilibrium between words and imagery. In this light we can find the justification for *xieyi* (“to portray only the meaning”) in both painting and calligraphy in traditional China. But *xieyi* is often misread as a certain rhapsodic style, like *kuangcao* (“wildly cursive script”) and *pomo* (“splashing of ink”) painting. Rather, the core of *xieyi* includes *wangwo* (“the forgetting of oneself”) and *wangyan* (“the forgetting of one's words”), both of which are fundamental approaches to meditation. The meditation of the artist differs from that of the thinker or the clergyman, since the former has to be in sync with the process of a certain materialisation. The making, the medium and material, and the meditation marked with *wangwo* and *wangyan* all merge to create artistic state in which the imagery of objects acquires the natural anima.

For this, a telling example may be found in “A Portrait of Six Persimmons” (*liushitu*) by Mu Xi of the Song Dynasty. We cannot interpret the image of the six persimmons exclusively from a human perspective. To fully understand the painting, we also need to adopt the point of view of the persimmons, which are neither conceptual nor mere shapes but are the artist's restoration of the anima from the real persimmons. One will fail to restore the anima if one simply imposes a general definition or imitates any individual form. Rather, one will not grasp the anima until one manages to keep one's thoughts dynamically vacant (*kong*) and silent (*jing*) by means of meditation.

This explains why traditional Chinese poetry, painting, and calligraphy intend to save the meaning from words, or keep the meaning out of words. They aim at doing away with the reliance on some presupposed conventions in order to attain a higher state of art. In this sense, the *xieyi* of traditional Chinese painting is all about *wangwo* and *wangyan*; that is, respectively, to forget the normative narrations of the tenets in one's memory and to forget any rules and regulations of form. For instance, conventions and confines like so-called abstraction, conception, and realism will be demolished. Only without any presupposition or preset form can the artist create a surprising new state of art. Such a state can help to deliver the artist from the paranoia shown either in excessive verbal narration or in excessive imagery representation in contemporary art.

It is obvious that *wangyan* is related to *kong* (“vacant”) and *xu* (“void”), two concepts in traditional Chinese philosophy. In art creation, one ought to be guided by *kong* and *xu* in dealing with medium and material, with craft and technique, with the objects to represent, and with the physical Nature. However, *kong* does not refer to nothing at all; it stands for a stance with which to establish a dialogue with the artwork or with the *wu* (“object”) in it. In other words, we cannot think of the images (e.g. mountain, river, rock, person) and materials (e.g. colour, canvas, ready-made article) of art as a mere instrumental language for the expression of our conceptions. On the contrary, we should forsake or partly forsake the ill-grounded intention to control the object (*kongwu*) and, as artists, “nullify the absence” of any idea of functionality, or practical idea that carries either a social or a formal function. It is only this way

that we can reach the genuine state of free will: from the state of “forgetting both the object and me” (*wuwoliangwang*) to that of “enlivening both the object and me” (*wuwoxiangsheng*).

I will now use “*wangyan*” to describe the six exhibiting artists’ thoughts on their art and states of their creation as a whole. Meanwhile, I have also noticed that these artists are highly concerned about “*wu*”, using images of trees and rocks, or materials like lacquer, Xuan paper, and charcoal. But they neither express their own conception through the objects nor represent the objects themselves. Actually, they “exchange one object for another” (*yiwuyiwu*), leaving the object to show its own *anima*. By “exchange”, they do have a change: they do not force it to happen but let the object to undergo the change on its own. This is the artist's state of “*wangyan*”.

Zhu Jinshi, for example, has been creating works on Xuan paper. He lays the hand-rubbed sheets together or several thousand sheets into a stack, posing a challenge to the geometric concept of modernists like Donald Judd. Their geometric concept is static, closed, and unary. But the Xuan paper cube by Zhu is a humanised structure, as every new sheet laid means a new temporal and spatial change made to the cube. The cube is not only an object that carries a certain concept, like the cubes of modernism, but is also an animated object that embodies repeated labour and a dialogue between the artist as a human being and the object as a thing. It shows a subdued beauty that is like a tranquil mountain valley (*xuhuaruogu*), not a formal beauty that is readily visible in a physical dimension. Indeed, Zhu's Thick Painting (*houhua*) also displays the intrinsic charm of the medium. The multi-coloured mixture of thick oil paint is somewhat like the strokes left by the brush pen of Chinese painting. The difference lies in the fact that ink penetrates the paper to the other side through the brush pen, whereas in Zhu's Thick Painting, strokes of oil paint are gathered. Both display the power of the strokes and, secondarily, the images that the strokes suggest.

For many years, Qin Yufen has been fond of working on bamboo, fans, and paper sheets. Her works can hardly be classified as installations because she sets the objects in a very natural way and exposes their beauty to the fullest. Without attempting to impose any meaning on them, she highlights the symbiotic relationship between them and human beings. The current exhibition includes some of her latest coloured ink paintings. Qin has repeatedly applied ink and paint on Xuan paper in order to make unexpected marks like those found on the walls of the ancient Dunhuang Caves. Belonging to nature as well as the shape of the object, the marks’ beauty comes from the integration of history, time, and culture.

By contrast, of all the artists Su Xiaobai is probably the most addicted to his medium. He transforms the centuries-old use of lacquer for use in contemporary art. Instead of using lacquer to convey decorative beauty or abstract meaning, Su wants to discover and present the quality of lacquer itself. In the repeated cycles of painting, polishing, observing, and distinguishing, lacquer eventually appears like fine jade. The contemporariness of Su's works is unveiled by the fact that Su has divested lacquer of its pronounced symbolism in ancient art, structuralism in modern art, and semiotics in postmodern art. His works are the silent lacquer itself, a concrete object that can be looked at, thought of, and touched, and that has the characteristics of fine jade. This, of course, is the result of Su's daily observation, polishing, and appreciation of lacquer for over twenty years. Su obtains the beauty of lacquer with his silence and hard work. This is a religious practice of *wuwoxiangsheng* (“enlivening both the object and me”). The way Su works on art is somewhat like the gradual enlightenment of the northern school of Zen Buddhism.

The theme and function of the painting do not particularly matter. What counts is the process of painting. This is the philosophy of amateurs. Like the literati artists of ancient China, Su Shi, Qian Xuan, and Zhao Mengfu, they are more men of letters than painters. For them, painting is an approach to self-cultivation. In terms of the cultural milieu, contemporary artists drastically differ from their ancient counterparts. But, although the heavy conceptual load and market pressure have spawned more and more professional artists, a few artists still choose to stay away from the “profession” and long for the self-cultivation of literati.

As artists, Tan Ping, Su Xinping, and Yang Zhilin made their debut in the 1980s. All of them are professors and served as deans or vice-deans of art colleges. They are occupied with both creation and administration, but their recent artworks carry “amateurish” features. They paint simple things from nature like trees and rocks. Like ancient literati, they attach their emotions to the objects of their painting. Artistically, they represent not only the objects but also their feelings. The stroke of their pen is the running of their thought. So we see in Su's “trees” a character, or a current of air (*qi*), which is about to expand, twist, and sink into silence. This is neither the formal effect that Su intends to make nor the impression of trees that Su wants to create, but the image that naturally flows from Su's mind. Having a full schedule, Su paints in his highly fragmented leisure hours. But as soon as he faces the painting, his mind is freed from the yoke of secular concerns and transcends to a pure realm. An interminable current of *qi* links the strokes scattered among the time fragments to form a whole world, a world of natural completion.

Yang Zhilin's “rocks” are similar to Su's “trees”. The images of the rocks are the images of his mind, but the rocks are more of a nature of script, partly because Yang employs the traditional medium of ink, Xuan paper, and brush pens. His rocks can hardly find a prototype in reality, but are more like those recorded in *The Manual of the Mustard Seed Garden (jieziyuanhuapu)* in which the rocks are set on pages. Yang says that he has “spit” out these rocks, “blocks” (*kuaili*) in his own terminology, one by one. To paint, according to Su Shi of the Song Dynasty, is to spit out the blocks in one's chest. The “spitting” is an empirical description that is visually straightforward, ideationally associative, and even behaviourally participatory. These rocks are individuals, set randomly and unrelated, with no centre, no boundary, and no background, but rich in character.

Tan Ping follows his emotions and feelings when painting, so the images in his paintings are a pure externalisation of sentiments, like musical rhythm. This seems to be an application of Clement Greenberg's concept of modern painting. But Tan's painting is more like calligraphy: while writing, he reads the lines left by his pen. Namely, he is not outputting his own sentiments through the lines, but is restoring his own sentiments from the vestiges left by the lines. So he has to do it as slowly as possible, like Master Hongyi, who spent six minutes writing one character. Attention is to be focused exclusively on the interaction between the pen, ink, and Xuan paper. No thought of other things is allowed. Like chanting the sutra, it is the meditative process that matters. If this is done swiftly, the painter may go to extremes: he may instantly project his own emotions onto the surface of the painting and meanwhile force himself to preset a final form. Tan endeavours to keep his charcoal lines running through the paper freely and independently. Their strength, speed, and intensity are all determined by the free flow of the lines themselves. Of course, the artist eventually controls the flow. But, as Tan has observed, the artist must try his best to “nullify his own absence” when painting.

After all, the artists included in the current exhibition have all purposely integrated the Oriental tradition of meditation into their creation of contemporary art.

In the previous five decades, contemporary art has carried with it so many conceptions and verbal narrations that it has almost been reduced to a puppet of cultural and political linguistics. On the other hand, some contemporary theories partially emphasise graphic power (i.e. the semantic function of graphics), giving rise to the dilemma that contemporary art wavers between the two extremes of words and graphics. The initial purpose of art is to present the wisdom in human nature, but now it gets eroded. Wisdom is not always utilitarian, either in a political or economic manner. As a pure state, it is more than narrations can express or images can imitate. Yi Pai attempts to rediscover this perception of wisdom and association of poetry in contemporary art and shorten the discrepancy between concepts and graphics, abstractness and reality, political discourse and aesthetic perception, and eliminate the “premodern, modern, postmodern, and contemporary” historical narration on the lineal basis of time. One of the tasks for contemporary art is to unearth and convert traditional non-Western resources and enrich its own wisdom so as to enjoy a greater compatibility and freedom.