

Beyond Colour: Chinese Contemporary Art

'Beyond Colour: Chinese Contemporary Art' is a group exhibition that showcases the work of five cross-generational abstract artists, including André Kneib, Juju Sun, Lan Zhenghui, Li Lei, and Qiu Deshu.

In contrast to 'Beyond Black and White', a group exhibition held in the gallery earlier this year, 'Beyond Colour' is a vibrant, visually arresting snapshot of the current epoch through colour in abstract painting. It is unmistakably contemporary, yet also indicative of a thoughtful engagement with past developments in the use of colour across Chinese painting history. The works of these five artists demonstrate their diverse, unique relationships with colour, evoking a varied spectrum of educational backgrounds, schools of thought, cultural influences and time periods. Collectively, these artists envisage a contemporary abstract painting practice that inventively employs colour as a means of expression.

The palette of Chinese painting, from ancient times through the dynastic periods and on into the 19th century, can be mapped cyclically with developments and stagnancies; subdued moments and exuberant ones; as well as ebbs and flows traceable to broader issues of class, taste, philosophy, religion, and culture. Far from being solely a modern or contemporary phenomenon caused by the recent unilateral influx of Western culture and its schools of artistic thought and practice, the oscillations in the use of colour in Chinese painting are perhaps better characterised as keeping pace with an internal cultural dialogue, which has gradually expanded into a cross-cultural one. Encompassing several voices, no one in particular being dominant, this is a complex and ongoing discourse stemming from multiple formal, aesthetic, conceptual, social, political, religious, philosophical, and cultural issues.

Like many other artistic developments, the use of colour in Chinese painting began with primitive naivety, gained sophistication as it matured and evolved, then swung back to simplicity after reaching the height of its exuberance. Archaeological findings place the appearance of richly coloured paintings as early as the pre-Han dynasties. The brilliant silk paintings from Han dynasty (206 B.C. – 200 A.D.) tombs and the extant works of the Jin dynasty (265–420) painter Gu Kaizhi indicate the predominance of exuberant colours up to the 4th century. Theories of colour application were also put forward by aesthetes, as with the famous saying, "Colour the objects as they appear to be naturally" by Xie He of the Southern dynasties (420–589). Early Tang (618–907) paintings were still heavily coloured but significant changes were noted towards mid-Tang, when artists began choosing to execute their works in a more subtle way and to explore the possibilities of painting in monochrome.

By the turn of the 10th century, ink, sometimes supplemented by a little colour, was widely accepted by literati as the most elegant media with which to paint landscapes. Southern Song artists were most proficient in ink landscapes, which came to form the mainstream of literati painting. It was in the Yuan period (1211–1368) that ink works reached their zenith, creating an impact that remained vital throughout the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, clearly distinguishing it from the brightly hued works produced by academy painters.

The following few centuries witnessed a steady decline in coloured works. The prevalence of Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist beliefs that cherished spiritual extrication, placidity and simplicity saw the literati rejecting colour in painting as tedious and vulgar. Additionally, the increased accessibility of paper and ink

quality after the Five Dynasties made ink painting more economical. Chinese painting thus remained relatively muted in colour until the end of the 19th century, when political upheaval and the arrival of a Western presence once more saw the emergence of a polychromatic palette in the art form. Artists of this generation began exploring new horizons in painting, many tapping into Western art and its lessons, such as the prime importance of colour and its treatment as a scientific subject, and various art movements that deployed the use of colour in an abstract manner. These artists benefited from training abroad or through the increased access to art from around the world that highly developed communication afforded. Political views shifted to elevate the social status of peasants and, with it, the status of richly hued folk art. The boundary between literati and professional artists gradually dissolved. The availability of inexpensive Western painting materials, such as watercolours, oil paints and acrylics, offered artists expanded options for their chosen medium, and the near-total dominance of muted ink painting in the preceding years gave way to a more varied and colourful artistic environment, both literally and figuratively.

For most traditional Chinese painting, the tenets of the art form—including the use of colour—were not solely preoccupied with realistic representation. Technical considerations surrounding the deployment of colour were, and still are, of secondary importance to the 'spirit' of the painting and the self-expression of the artist. In the context of this exhibition, each of the artists' use of colour is situated within a broader innovative spirit. This spirit is captured in works that embody their varied formal concerns, philosophies and epistemologies, and that acknowledge indebtedness to the rich heritage of Chinese artistic culture. Mapping out a wide-ranging discourse that goes beyond just the inventive use of colour, these works gesture at new frontiers in the field of contemporary abstract painting.

Qiu Deshu (b. 1948) was born in Shanghai, China. He was among the artists who cofounded the post-Mao experimental art group called the Grass Painting Society (*caocao huashe*) in the 1970s. In the early 1980s, he developed his signature style of works called "fissuring" (*lie bian*). The concept of "fissuring", which literally means tearing and changing in Chinese, is a pictorial metaphor for the artist's life and artistic career, both of which have experienced dramatic disruptions and setbacks. In these works, he applies vivid colours to xuan paper, which he tears up, and mounts the fragments to a base layer, often leaving space between to create a pictorial field with the "cracks" that he feels are symbolic of life's journey.

Lan Zhenghui (b. 1959) graduated from Sichuan Fine Arts Institute in 1987, and currently lives and works in Beijing and Toronto. Lan Zhenghui's monumental paintings and striking use of ink reflect his constant pursuit of expression and feeling. His works are "bursts of emotion on paper" and are characterised by an abstract ink-splash style. Influenced by his background in science, Lan's aesthetic moves deftly between the realms of the rational and irrational. His brushstrokes are created by systemic body movements, which contribute to the visual and spiritual impact of his works, evoking the swelling of muscle, blood and physical power. This, combined with his use of vibrant acrylic hues on traditional Chinese xuan paper as featured in his recent works in the exhibition, demonstrates bold use of colour as a vehicle for challenging conventions in traditional medium and form.

Juju Sun (b. 1973) was born in Jiangxi, China. She moved to North America at age 18 and studied at the Ottawa School of Art and the Art Student's League of New York. Feeling that her cultural roots were important, she returned to Beijing and now divides her time between Beijing and New York. Juju Sun's paintings revel in the beauty of the medium of paint, suggesting landscapes through scribbles and thick swaths of gestural strokes. Her work variously shows the influence of French Impressionism, Abstract Expressionism, and the flowing naturalism of Chinese brushwork. By jointly assimilating these techniques and traditions, Sun captures such ineffable effect as shimmering water and dancing sunlight in her abstract compositions. She sees her paintings as originating from the very centre

of her being, imbuing them with an ontological awareness and a sense of temporality. Sun's mastery of exuberant colour and the poetry of line are coupled with a fearless painterliness—she describes the act of painting as a joyful one, 'a great love'.

André Kneib (b. 1952) was born in Alsace-Lorraine, France. In 1995, Kneib began his study of calligraphy with Ung-No Lee, a master Korean calligrapher at the Musée Cemuschi, in Paris. He is currently maître de conférences, teaching Chinese civilisation at the National School of Oriental Languages (INALCO), Paris and at the University of Paris 4, Sorbonne.

Kneib's distinctive calligraphy work pays close attention to the nuances of semantic meaning and the emotional resonances implicit in individual Chinese characters. Perhaps the most important contribution that the artist makes to the development of modern Chinese calligraphy is the introduction of colour as integral to the formal structure and emotional tenor of the written character. In some works, subtle inflections of colour serve to accent the highly gestured movements and shapes of the ink markings. In other works, such as the ones in this exhibition, colour forms the very body and flesh of the character, as modulations in the saturation and suffusion of hues add an evocative dimension and depth to his brushstrokes. This has defined a new range of transcultural formal and expressive issues for contemporary abstract calligraphy practitioners inside and outside of China to explore.

Li Lei (b. 1965) was born in Shanghai, China and is widely acknowledged as one of the early and pivotal figures in the field of Chinese abstract art. While deeply rooted in Chinese philosophy and culture, his work has surmounted the formal strictness of Asian art and he has found a free and unfettered way to paint without eschewing the significance of expressive statement.

Li's paintings shifted to the non-figurative early in his career. However, his abstract work has not ceased to reference the rich imagery of the landscapes he discovered as a child. The rivers, flora and fauna, and rich, yellow earth of northwest China continue to inform many of the forms and colours in his work, as does the elegance of the ancient Majiayao Civilisation and its primitive yet mysterious legends. Abstract, gestural and pictorial as they are, his works are evocative of personal feelings and emotions—put simply, they "come from the heart".

This exhibition is a reflection of the varied approaches to colour present in contemporary abstract painting, arising from the equally varied background influences of five distinctive artists. Collectively, their works offer us a sampling of the thoughtful, complex and meaningful engagements with colour that are unfolding in contemporary abstract art.

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