

Lovesickness

Heavy Ink Paintings by Lan Zhenghui

Robert C. Morgan

From a traditional perspective, the art of calligraphy in China offers a visual syntax for communication through a combination of aesthetic and spiritual precision. This is made evident in the brushwork shown in the marks and traces of Tang courtiers, scholars, and magistrates. Years later, itinerant artist monks who practiced Ch'an in their forest retreats, invented atypical and unwavering linear formations that proceeded to reverberate definitively through space. In either case, the first stroke on the page told everything. Here the question was posed: Did the first stroke hold the energy of the sacred *shi* or was it a fake? In the presence of the *shi* was true, the first stroke would lead the way from beginning to completion. It might begin as a cursive ideogram and result as an inspired poem, or it might transform into a rising mountain peak, an gentle rain cloud, or a running stream beside a grove of pine trees. In this way, the formation of Chinese calligraphy always doubles between image and thought, thereby revealing its potential to move between writing and painting.

In the history of Chinese art, writing and painting are inevitably drawn to one another. They virtually overlap one another as they derive from the same source. Poetry may be written in the sky of a landscape either by the painter or by another artist or poet intent on offering a salutation or eulogy. There are

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times when the legibility of the calligraphic signs may suddenly turn to abstraction or beyond recognition. We see the genesis of this tendency in the wild cursive script of Zhang Shui and the "drunken monk" Huai-su, who both worked during the eighth century of the Tang. Their powerful and eccentric linear constructions reveal a distillation of profound thought as it moves into lyrical feeling. Their unique calligraphy functioned as a kind of metaphysical bridge between writing and painting in the process of entering an ecstatic and rhythmical sense of time/space. Although irrational in origin, this wild cursive script resonates with elegant and expressive content, filled with spiritual and metaphysical intonations. In the later genres of Chinese landscape painting, one may detect traces of these linear motifs in the compositions of the great ink painters from the Northern Sung Dynasty of the late tenth century and eventually in the masterful scrolls of the Ming Dynasty five centuries later.

In contemporary ink wash painting, which some scholars associate with the "1985 New Wave" in China, this quality of line -- perhaps more eccentric than lyrical -- also plays a pre-eminent role as a discerning factor in representing the state of mind of the artist. Here the emphasis on an expressionist aesthetic through ink wash painting as shown in the sublime forms of Sichuan-born artist Lan Zhenghui reflects energy made visible. The task of the painter is to discover nature through contemplating emptiness of mind as in the tradition of the Ch'an painters several centuries earlier. This void (or *sunyata*) harbors not only the force and momentum within these large ink paintings, but also informs the work's infinite feeling for space. Lan's "heavy ink" paintings -- a term coined by Chinese critic Liu Xiaochun -- come full circle into the foreground of contemporary Chinese art. Through the process of layering ink on water, Lan's densely refined and bristling surfaces of black ink transform our awareness of space through the relativity of time. There is a profound paradox resident within these paintings. While Lan Zhenghui's large ink wash

paintings point toward the future, they remain equally close to the ancient teachings of Lao-tse. Whereas the Tao shows the way to our destiny with nature, our optical entry into the spectral void is momentarily absorbed by the darkness in Lan's paintings. As we become aware of our consciousness through the act of perception, the darkness is transformed into a reflective surface of light through the density of the ink. We read in at the outset of Chapter 25 in the *Tao te Ching* (Trans. Stephen Mitchell, 1988):

- The heavy is the root of the light.
- The unmoved is the source of all movement.

The calligraphic paintings in Lan Zhenghui's current *Ink Painting Dream* continue to possess an insurmountable presence, as did the earlier ink wash paintings that referred more directly to nature, such as the landscape, or to natural phenomena, such as the seasons. Most of these paintings in the recent exhibition, including the *Lovesick, Leap, Standing, Hesitation series* and *Satori series*, are more concerned with mental or emotional state of Being. Whereas the earlier paintings function as metaphors of nature, such as those shown in the exhibition, titled *Mighty Rain* (Jakarta, 2009), the recent exhibition is more concerned with visual metonyms. The distinction is crucial, particularly given the scale in which Lan has worked over the past few years. Whereas a metaphor represents something specific in a painting, a metonym exists as a parallel sign in relation to another kind of feeling. In the case of a metonym, the painting carries its own independence in relation to a feeling, but does not intend to be that feeling. In the two large horizontal ink paintings on rice paper (mounted on silk), titled *Hop series 1* and *Hop series 2*, the reference to hopping may be within the artist's mind, but the ink wash itself has its own qualities as a painting apart from having a mimetic relationship to the title. *Lovesick series 1, Lovesick series 2, and Lovesick series 3* are all in some sense

morphologically related to one another, but their relationship to the title may also suggest something different than what the viewer actually feels in the painting. In general, the problem of meaning in the correspondence between paintings and titles is more complex in painting than in literature, especially if the painting is visually abstracted from the actuality of the emotion being felt or observed. One might say the same about the vertical *Satori series* -- a title referring to sudden enlightenment in Ch'an Buddhism (Zen). The feeling of dignity about these paintings may refer to an enlightened state of mind or "no mind" (*wu nien*), but again, the painterly qualities within the ink wash, scale, and format of the painting have their own qualities, which may correspond obliquely to enlightenment.

Titles given to paintings have the advantage of creating a spur both for the artist and the viewer, but in different ways. This, of course, is an aesthetic argument. For the artist, the title may have a personal meaning that carries the weight of his inspiration during the time he is deeply immersed in the act of painting. For the viewer it may open another threshold in order to gain access or appreciation of the painting, less in formal terms than through some kind of sentiment or provocation. Within the realm of aesthetics, any and all of these are valid. Viewers will feel what they feel, and there is no way to deny this legitimacy. On the other hand, painters will go about their business and do their work. If the paintings tend toward abstraction, the psychology of reception may be felt on a more personal level than if they are "realist." But even this claim is negligible. There is no single correct emotional response to a work of art and there is nothing to be proven. In the work of Lan Zhenghui, it is a matter of profound feeling. His training as an artist at the Sichuan Academy of Art and his experience over more than two decades have taken him to where he is today. Ultimately, his exorbitant ability to project feeling into these heavy ink paintings is what gives his work importance. Whether he is

soaked in the black rain or feels fever in the high mountains, the internal equivocation between Being and Non-Being -- in essence, the way of the Tao -- may contribute to his legacy, but quality of the works themselves will give him the verdict. Given the work in this and other recent exhibitions, it would appear that Lan is clearly on the right track.

In a recent lecture given by another Chinese painter and digital artist at the China Art Institute in Manhattan, two important points were raised toward the conclusion of his remarks. There were stated in the form of two questions: One, does art define itself as something that has no function? And two, is it possible to make art without electronics? In reflecting on these questions in relation to the work of Lan Zhenghui, his ink wash paintings would appear to have no function. One might argue they are they are both functionless and purposeless. They have nothing to do other than stare back at us as we engage in the process of starring at them. Even so, they feel like works from the present moment of our history. Somehow they connect with diverse cultural traditions within the global environment in a way quite different from what might have been the case in the previous century. In contrast to the media rhetoric of the 1950s and 1960s where "East and West" clichés were bantered back and forth on both sides as if to conceal major economic and ideological differences, the meeting point between the hemispheres today appears to stand on a firmer ground, perhaps, related to the accessibility of information from Internet sources, both official and unofficial. Therefore, when the role of electronics is questioned in terms of making art, I am not entirely convinced that Lan's heavy ink paintings would have the open cultural reception they appear to have today without electronics, even though electronics has little to do with how they are made. Ironically, the immateriality of the Internet has, if anything, promoted a vast acquisition of material, including works of art. Given the absence of spiritual concerns among those who have matured during

the informational age of global entrepreneurship, one might inquire as to whether it was still possible to think of art as a spiritual phenomenon -- as I understand the intentions of Lan Zhenhui -- removed from their material (marketing) function? The fact that Lan's paintings can now be shared by populations both in the East or the West suggests that some glimmer of evolution has become apparent where the separation of hemispheres appears unnecessary through the perennial exchange of open cultural ideas. Assuming this evolution is happening (though in a nascent stage), the energy and beauty that many viewers ascribe to Lan's paintings retain an ineluctable mystery and qualitative assurance capable of opening doors to a primal world of basic spiritual understanding that was cast aside at the outset of the Industrial Revolution. Now is the time to regenerate the possibility of such ideas -- that paintings, like those by Lan Zhenhui (among others) -- can lift the lid from repression without being directly political or offensive and form the basis of a new aesthetic where the embodiment of basic human values overrides the temporary seduction of marketing trends that are likely to repeat *ad nauseum* unless our experience with what is significant in art begins to take the upper hand.

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