

Wai Pongyu, **Boundless Vista the Lifetime Love**, 2011, ink on paper, 3 x 4 ft. All images: Courtesy of the Artist and Grotto Fine Art, Hong Kong.

# *Eternity In The Moment*

*Hong Kong artist Wai Pongyu's ink art, which is steeped in tradition, speaks across cultures.*

*Within it he addresses personal harmony with the world and nature's myriad dramas.*

**By Paul Serfaty**

**H**ong Kong boasts many artists who have made an impact on the alert collector or critic. And through exceptional spirits, they have contributed importantly to developing new ideas out of old traditions. As Max Hearn's introduction to the current show *Ink Art*<sup>1</sup> at the Metropolitan Museum in New York notes, there now exists an art that "has fundamentally altered inherited Chinese tradition, while maintaining an underlying

identification with the expressive language of ink art."

Unfortunately, the Met show chose to exclude non-PRC-born artists; yet both old and young generations working in Hong Kong—Wucius Wong (b.1936), Fung Ming Chip (b.1951) (whose work is showing at the Met), and Wilson Shieh (b.1970) among others—match up to Hearn's observation. And there are other trends not as explicit in *Ink Art*, including universalism, harmony, and spontane-

ity, that are explored through the work of young Hong Kong artist, Wai Pongyu, whose art can be seen in the collections of the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco and the Ashmolean, Oxford, England, as well as in the collection of the late Prof. Michael Sullivan.

Wai Pongyu, who was born in Hainan Island in 1982 and received his BA in fine art from the Chinese University of Hong Kong in 2006, is no novice. In his universal interests and pursuit of harmo-

ny, he follows a long tradition. However, the raw materials deployed in his work are quite distinctive, and in certain respects unique. Equally, while his artistic process is deeply Chinese, his specific methods of execution are highly individual. He is not easy to categorize, though he 'simply' draws in ball pen on Chinese or Japanese paper.

Wai's way of working is both Western and Chinese; his raw materials are both abstract and real; his subjects both big and small; his method both meticulous and spontaneous. In its conciseness and hidden references it is more reminiscent of poetry than of the visual arts. This multiple identity—and the corresponding lack of a unique *ism* to attach to Wai—would please Amartya Sen, who postulated in *Identity and Violence* that the desire to package people into categories and the insistence on single-identity characterization leads to division amongst men.

**W**ai's work so far demonstrates two major and distinct approaches to creative origins, united under a single methodology or process. First, in the years immediately after graduation, when his works first entered public collections, his raw forms consisted primarily of abstractions—lines, grids, language, and ideographs. These elements evolved together in broadly orderly fashion into a finished work through a spontaneous but slow process that often took months to complete, but ended up exuding a compelling sense of naturalness that is difficult to explain. As Paul Klee (1879–1940) put it, "The power of creativity cannot be



Wai Pongyu, *A Rhythm of*, 2008, ball pen on paper, 60.6 x 91.2 cm.

A RHYTHM OF ...

*Salt of the sea.  
Grain on the sky.  
Caves in the dawn.  
Stones in the dusk.  
Zephyr. Shores.  
The Cliff.  
Birds fly without wings.  
Rocks surf yet dry.  
Lives and lines  
Lie in the rhythm of your mind.*

Wai Pongyu  
April 2008

named. It remains mysterious to the end."<sup>2</sup>

Secondly, in the two years leading up to Wai's works in his recent show *Moment of Truth – the Synergy of Ink*<sup>3</sup> at Grotto Fine Art in Hong Kong, his approach gradually changed. It became not the evolution of lines and language, but the agglomeration of materials culled from nature—rocks, stars, fish, nerves, arteries, and tree bark. These, he transforms, melds, and harmonizes into the finished work. Again, the process is slow-motion, though still spontaneous, and in the assembly of disparate elements that almost magically cohere, produces the same sense of naturalness, of harmony. The drawing grows from his feelings and responses to what crystallizes on the paper as he draws.

Though it assimilates a wide range of sources—pure line, language, nature, music, the body, and the mind—Wai's work evolves not according to a primary master plan but according to the artist's feeling for connection and the intuition of the moment. As R.P. Blackmur wrote of Ezra Pound's poetry: "*The Cantos* are not complex, they are complicated; they are not arrayed by logic or driven by pursuing emotion, they are connected because they follow one another ...."

Despite its many associations with nature, Wai's work remains essentially abstract: he does not have preconceived objects to present to the viewer. That was also Lui Shou Kwan's (1919–1975) way. Said Hong Kong's master of ink abstraction, quoted in a current show at Hong Kong's Chinese University: "As soon as the dots and lines appear on the paper ..., some new idea or sentiment may come into play; then I may not dictate or force my brush to obey my original sentiments or idea."



Wai Pongyu, *An Afternoon in the Echo Sand Mountain*, 2007, ball pen on printed paper, 29.7 x 42 cm.



In viewing *Synergy of Ink*, we leave behind analysis and ask: “What do gigantic humpbacked whales, barnacles, whole galaxies, stars, the thoracic arterial system, and tree bark have in common?” If you are Wai Pongyu, it is the harmony of nature. Wai himself has spoken of a Hegelian “synthesizing of all opposites;” but the Hegelian dialectic seems altogether more forceful than Wai’s ‘harmonizing’ approach to creation.

Wai’s combination of spontaneity and automatism also reminds one of Henri Michaux (1899–1984) who created images that feel like figures running, or calligraphy come alive, inspired by how a master in Asian art releases direct control of the brush, and relies on experience-based intuition. If Michaux’s tachist works, especially in India ink, are created through spontaneity at speed, parallels still apply to Wai’s ‘slow-speed automatism.’ Wai exemplifies ‘spontaneity’ in Asian art, but in a very personal way, through execution without haste. As Max Hearn said on Shi Guori’s *camera obscura* photographic prints, “The tranquility is the result of the slowed-down technique.” And Shi says, “This is a spiritual experience for me, sit-

ting inside the camera,” a sentiment that echoes Wai’s cathartic feelings about the long drawn-out process by which he creates. Not only is his technique tranquil; he slowly absorbs the visual riches of nature long before creating a drawing. Paradoxically, this tranquility in execution and his drive for new artistic answers also reflect real-life stress and learning.

In an artist’s development, something is gained and something is lost. With Wai, he leaves behind a sense of order and gains imagination and openness; he loses stability and gains tension; he leaves behind a broadly uniform visual field and plays with space and emptiness. With Wai, ‘nature’ is no longer an outcome, rather an impression of nature on paper derived indirectly from the evolution of lines drawn on paper. It has become a source, assembled directly from nature and from his memory of natural images. Instead of developing a drawing toward an “idealized nature,” of points ‘walking’ as Klee put it, Wai assembles “magical nature” generated by the interaction of randomness, memory, freedom, and imagination. Despite similarities with Ihab Hasan’s 1982 characterization of

post-Modernism, he is not using openness, chance, anarchy, or combination for the purpose of play: chance and the anarchic assemblies of post-Modernists deny seriousness and purpose. Wai does assemble, does use spontaneity, but for a deeper purpose—going beyond play, aiming to find and display deep truths of unity across barriers of time and existential difference: we might call this trans-post-Modernism.

The change from ‘lines’ to ‘things’ as raw material for drawing has significant effects. Take the sense of order and imagine a ‘control vs. freedom’ visual axis. Lines and grids lie toward one end of this axis and collections of random points from the void at the other (perhaps atoms, clustering to form stars.) In the middle is nature, produced by loosening the lines or by tightening the randomness. Wai’s earlier lines appealed to our sense of order. When a grid relaxes, it can express nature more than man. So Wai took moving lines, waves, and transformed them through organic growth from order into nature, evoking a waterfall, the idea of landscape, as well as creating a sense of natural texture.



Wai Pongyu, **Heart Sutra**, 2008, ball pen on paper, 60.8 x 81.3 cm.

Wai also used language, ideographs. In terms of order, Chinese is ideographic and taught in conformity to a grid, and language belongs more to the 'grid' end. In *Heart Sutra*, Wai controlled, stretched, and transformed the ideographs of a Buddhist sutra into an evocation of a prayer flag floating in the wind; the ebb and flow of lines transform into a Heart Sutra, become a prayer.

Wai's early work *Boundless Vista the Lifetime Love* (2011) demonstrates his ability to take ideographic raw material—in this case the Chinese language lyrics of two different Cantonese pop songs—to make something that might be an aerial photograph of the Finnish tundra or a map of a complex archipelago, all through the painstaking process of drawing the lyrics repeatedly in six different colors, the pattern dictated by his feeling for the appropriateness of his next gap or stroke, ideograph or space, action or non-action. *Chains of Love* (2009) did the same for Western lyrics.

**W**ai's lines not only gave order, but they also gave rootedness. They stabilized through a reference framework. Now, the stability and order brought by the steady progress of the lines from edge to edge has been replaced by tension and interaction between matter and void. It is noteworthy that Willem de Kooning (1904–1997)—normally an 'all-over' painter who covered the canvas—played with similar effects in his late oils of 1983–1985, fascinated by the tension between void and paint, and said, "In *Genesis* it is said that in the beginning was the void and God acted upon it. For an artist that is clear enough."

One sees this in Wai Pongyu's *Moment of Truth 1* (2011) and his fan painting *Moment of Truth 2* (2012). Here, the drawn content of the work loses its connection to the edge of the paper. The positive, drawn, space floats unmoored. The mesh of lines breaks apart. Islands of lines begin to appear. They are connected, but as the parts of an explosion are linked, by the dynamics that split them apart, around the curve of the fan. 'Rational' lines not only broke apart, but also ceded pride of place to natural phenomena as key components of his work. The diminished sense of order that ensued and the in-



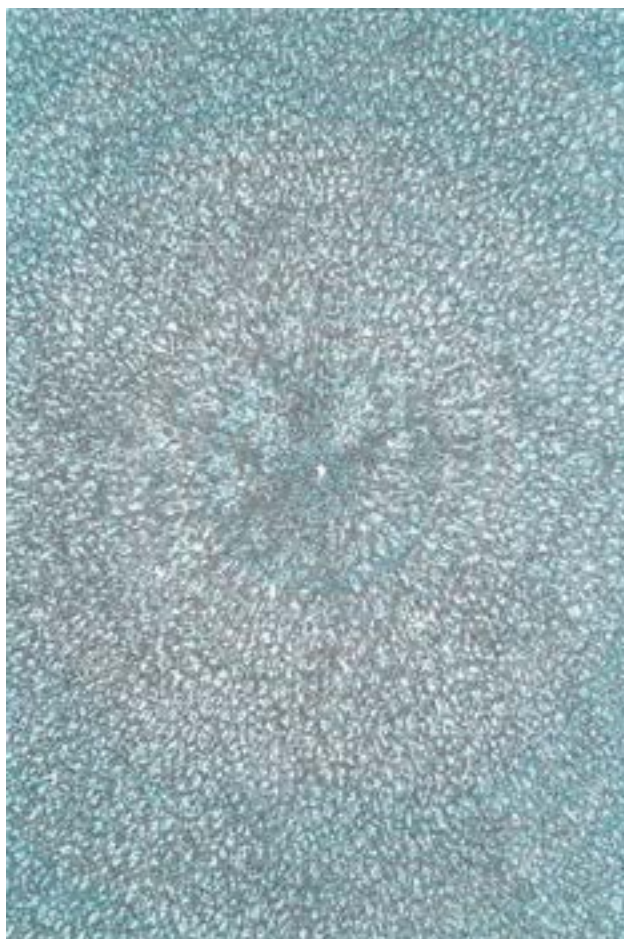
Wai Pongyu, *Moment of Truth 1*, 2011, ball pen on paper, 21 x 29.7 cm.

trusion of emotion and instability in place of line and language have intensified the depth, the texture, and the concentration of his art.

Wai's use of space has dramatically deepened. His new works operate firmly in three dimensions whereas

before the progression of lines flattened the work into the plane. Now, these interact with the space around them, twisting into and away from the viewer's gaze: his textures tantalize. Previously, we might have seen bark, tundra, or a stylized waterfall—inanimate aspects of nature. Now, nature gyrates before us. We see twisting planes, intersecting tubules, the *feeling* of nature, even without the *express reality*, as the artist allows his instinct and emotion to catch the moment; we feel this, even though we cannot, at first glance, identify specifically what we see, but imagine as children look at clouds.

Wai's use of texture, expressed through more varied pressure in the drawing of line or surface, now synthesizes, unifies, and harmonizes spaces and new elements more assertively. His textures are no longer primarily dependent on the rhythm of the lines. Also, the Japanese paper he uses is not blank. It is flecked with natural fibers; this creates another layer in the work, reminds us of nature in the paper itself. The alternation of light and dark space and how the edges of drawn space exchange territory with the surrounding "un-drawn" space, wisps of lines often extending into emptiness and white space cascading into the lines, add textural interest and render ambiguous that which is a dominant and that which is a subordinate



Wai Pongyu, *Chains of Love*, 2009, ink on paper, 91 x 60.5 cm.





Wai Pongyu, *Moment of Truth 23*, 2013, ball pen on paper, 33 x 32 cm.

Wai Pongyu, *Moment of Truth 21*, 2013, ball pen on paper, 33 x 32 cm.

part of the drawing.

In addition to changes in expressive impact, new treatments become possible. Wai has a strong interest in fractal natural phenomena—in which the large remains compatible with the small. This allows him, in his latest drawings, to move freely between the cosmic and the microscopic as well as to harmonize even the gigantic with the small.

**A**s a result of these cross-scale relationships, the careful viewer finds Wai's most recent works 'contain multitudes' (as Walt Whitman said of the apparent contradictions in the teeming thoughts in his poetry.) We understand better how Wai's imagination can seamlessly blend the craters of the moon, the suckers of a squid's tentacles, barnacles on the fin of a humpback whale, and stars from a distant galaxy, as in his *Moment of Truth 23* (2013). We also see the scale of Wai's works is not their point. Their point is how they express oneness and the harmony of the whole.

Wai's works are created through intense concentration applied within relatively small spaces. His new works are denser in content than earlier line-based works.

Indeed, their smallness underlines their concentration. We no longer have the clarity of lines to guide us. The works demand more attention, but reward more deeply. His ability to express a world in the smallest space is valuable in densely packed Hong Kong. In their ambiguity, and perhaps contradiction, between subject matter and scale, Wai is not alone. This is visible in the works of many artists: Henry Moore, for example, more publicly recognized for his large sculpture than his small drawings, uses line to create spatial depth and scale in his prints.

Other consequences flow from these changes. In many of Wai's current works the drawn elements appear as if

surrounded by clouds, detached from the real world. The "un-drawn" portion of the paper becomes as important as the 'positive' space, the surrounding emptiness adds uncertainty, implies hidden potential, and the viewer's imagination roams free.

Chinese painting tradition employs a similar and effective convention by isolating distant peaks in a sea of clouds. They are rooted somewhere, but these magical peaks shimmer in the distance where many alternative realities may exist. Roy Lichtenstein in his *Landscapes in the Chinese Style* acknowledged the effectiveness and importance of this tradition. And in Asia, the works of Japan's master animator, Miyazaki, in his treatment of dream worlds, confirms that suspension of disbelief and our imaginations are encouraged by detachment.

This perspective on 'emptiness' takes us back into Chinese tradition. In discussing Fung Ming Chip's work, Hearn quotes from the Heart Sutra: "Form does not differ from emptiness, emptiness does not differ from form. Form itself is emptiness, emptiness itself is form." He reminds us that the void is not void—it is integral to creation.

Modern science infers dark mat-



Wai Pongyu, *Moment of Truth 2*, 2011, ball pen on paper 1 x 2 ft.

ter that cosmologists believe lies between visible stars fuelling growth in our universe. *Moment of Truth* works float in their own space, rejecting the idea that a work of art should 'cut' from the world a specific piece of our visual field. Instead Wai's work abstracts components capable of evoking the whole, uniting them though they are disparate in time, nature, function, and degree of abstraction. Here, the void is integral to the whole. Between the whale's barnacled flipper and the interstellar gases in *Moment of Truth 23* lies not empty space but the deep origin of these phenomena, drawn together and harmonized by Wai.

One could say each of the *Moment* works links the complexity of all life. Stars, rocks, landscapes, nerves, muscles, blood vessels, though clearly differentiated here on earth, can co-exist so closely, without conflict, through the artist's vision. Still, if in inward detail and classical treatment of void the *Moment of Truth* works belong somewhat in the *literati* tradition, they remain inescapably modern in their refusal to be conventional; conversely very pure in their refusal to offer easy understanding to the viewer.

**T**he 1960s' 'alternative' philosophy saw living and inanimate objects as part of a whole living earth: Gaia. As Stewart Brand's 1960s' *Whole Earth Catalog* put it, "We can't put it together, it is together." However, using art to demonstrate "It is together" is not easy. Without years of training, practice, learning, and experience, it is impossible to make works such as this, in which the discipline is in the doing, rather than in the following of artificial rules, whose sense of structure emanates from underlying natural law, not from externally imposed frameworks.

The artist chose openness. Different viewers may read message-free works differently. This openness to instinct over formal structure also favors emotion and humanity over order and control. It is a natural evolution from Wai's early work. These assemblies mirroring and opening



Wai Pongyu, *Moment of Truth 5*, 2012, ball pen on paper, 3 x 1 ft.

the universal to us are the artist's most honest and spontaneous expression. He offers them not in dramatic gesture but in a slow, almost meditative setting-down of his response as the raw material accumulates in his mind, awaiting the right moment or the right emotion to be set down in conformity with nature.

One senses in *Moment of Truth 24*, for example, that Wai's instincts, expressed through his actions, accord with the spontaneous synergies, the integration of nature and spirit achieved by the best artists in the ink idiom in China, Japan, Korea, and, not the least, in Hong Kong.

Wai also satisfies that Western lover of Eastern art Paul Klee's hope that artists would find something deeper: "... other ways of looking into the object which go still farther, which lead to a humanization of the object and create, between the 'I' and the object, a resonance surpassing all optical foundations. There is the non-optical way of intimate physical contact, earthbound, that reaches the eye of the artist from below, and there is the non-optical contact through the cosmic bond that descends from above."

Wai Pongyu's development—his search for the cosmic bond—parallels that expressed in Lui Shou Kwan's *Zen* works in respecting and building on tradition while operating distinctively apart from and beyond it. He succeeds also to paraphrase William Blake, in finding eternity in the moment and infinity in a grain of sand.  $\Delta$

*Notes:*

1. The exhibition *Ink Art*, curated by Max Hearn, was held from December 11, 2013 through April 6, 2014, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.
2. *Moment of Truth – the Synergy of Ink* was an exhibition held at Grotto Fine Art in Hong Kong, November 14 to December 7, 2013.
3. Paul Klee, *Notebooks*, 1921, Trans., Spiller (ed), Wittenborn (NY), Humphries (London).

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