

## Language, Space, Time and Nature

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Seeing Wai Pongyu's latest work for the first time evokes strange sensations, not just because of the utterly natural feel it exudes, despite being man-made, but also for the fact that it took a year of meticulous work to create.

Through this work, Wai has continued his exploration of the ways in which calligraphy may be used in artistic expression, and the results are as beguiling as ever.

In "Boundless Vista Of The Lifetime Love", he takes as his starting point the lyrics of two Cantonese pop songs, Boundless Vista, and Lifetime Love, made famous in the 90's and dealing with situations and emotions of importance to the artist. These lyrics are then written out, broadly sequentially and somewhat overlapping to create a Chinese landscape, a map, an agglomeration of signs, a mixture of dense deserts and cloudy voids, a series of waterfalls and rocky fissures, streams and pools, hints of clouds and lichen, scurrying figures and thickly packed layers of crystalline materials.

This is achieved by way of a process both methodical and time-consuming. The artist selects an appropriate colour for the calligraphic image or phrase to be written - as a rule, for the basic elements, a sienna which offers warmth and compatibility with a range of other colours. These others may be turquoise, or purple, or cobalt blue, or a middle grey or a pale grey. As the phrases succeed each other and the pattern of colours expressing the text grows in space and in depth, the edges of the ideographs may be filled in with fine lines of black, adding definition to the language and sharpness to the edges, while defining spaces in a way that maintains the viewer's awareness of the calligraphic underpinnings of the work. It is important to do so, as the gradually unfolding pattern of the language across the paper, being the consequence of a myriad small decisions by the artist regarding what is to come next at any given point - whether to pack the ideographs densely, or leave a gap; which colours to use, how the proximate spaces relate to each other - these and many other factors represent the cumulative result of a series of individual decisions made over many months.

There is a degree of strategy in the overall layout of the work. It is composed from the lower left edge across and slightly up, then moves down and to the right, before swinging up and round across the top of the rectangular sheet of drawing paper (4ft x 3ft). But it is neither really possible, nor the artist's intention, to predetermine the evolution of these colours, forms and relationships, as the work progresses extremely slowly. An hour may be required to complete one square centimetre. The physical work is arduous, and of necessity discontinuous. I believe it is as a consequence of this that it has acquired a patina of complete naturalness in the same way that evolution and nature work, and hence the harmony that it exudes, while still possessing an undeniable sense of motion and life. It offers a kind of slow-motion automatism, a sense of spontaneous inevitability, but without the manic quality that can characterise the work of Tachists such as Michaux, and it is possessed of the sense that the elements have life of their own.

How does this come about? It is true the artist alone makes decisions, in that he alone writes, draws, composes what he does, when he does (even if there is inevitably a tradition behind him); however it is also true that artists often feel that they are a channel for creation, and express a sense of humility, good fortune even, that the creative process has been carried on through themselves. As Stravinsky put it about the composition of the *Rite of Spring*:

«Je n'étais guidé par aucun système quel qu'il soit dans le *Sacre du Printemps*. ... il n'y a que très peu de tradition en arrière-plan du *Sacre du Printemps*. J'avais seulement mon oreille pour m'aider, j'entendais et j'écrivais ce que j'entendais. *Je suis le canal à travers lequel le Sacre passait.* »<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase in italics translates as: "I am the channel through which the *Rite* was passed." Igor Stravinsky & Robert Craft, *Conversations with Igor Stravinsky*, University of California Press, Los Angeles, 1980, p.147-148.

Wai Pongyu describes a similarly unguided process, using eye and hand rather than ear:

“To achieve naturalness, it is inevitable to shut down the self, to let the heart, the will flow; say yes to all feelings, without hesitation. To do this, I would imagine how sand is washed on the shore, how winds shape the waves... what forms take shape from feeling ... Sometimes I intended to draw differently, but my hand refused to listen, would not conform to the guidance of my deliberate will, but followed some other instruction. Thus the drawing process became the slow motion transfer of the developing work from the vessel (myself) spontaneously, inevitably, automatically to the paper.”

Just one example of the outcome of this gradual process can be seen at bottom right of the work. The ideographs seem gradually to detach themselves from the larger mass of words that has built up behind them in the centre of the composition, and to progressively assert their individuality, becoming more and more readily recognisable as possessing specific shape and linguistic meaning. This individuality and identity is given counterpoint by the sheer mass of ideographs dominating the upper middle right of the drawing, possessed of a rich reddish component to the colour palette and feeling somewhat like the layers laid down by the passage of centuries of time over gradually worn rock, as indeed – in terms of the time spent by the artist in putting these ideographs in place, twelve long months in all – is by analogy the case.

And between the high plateau of the dense red desert, and the loose calving of the words from the main mass of the language below, lies a landscape of fissures and streams, for all the world like a classical Chinese painting, in which the links between the ideographs falter, gaps appear, chains of space imply a connection between adjacent areas of the paper otherwise covered in densely packed calligraphic images.

The movement of the words around the paper to the top left quadrant is accompanied by the gradual appearance of gaps reminiscent of the Finnish tundra as winter ends, bits of lichen gradually poking through the snow as the ice melts away; or could bring to mind the waters that swell up between islands in estuarine landscapes as the tide or the flood rises. The naturalness of it all compels one to think of landscapes seen through the medium of Google Maps satellite images or of beautiful, high resolution printed maps, which translate into macro form the microscopic order of the underlying crystal structure of the land.

And as the words circle round the drawing and reach back towards their origin, small wisps of pale orange and pink reach out from the original body of language below, as if trying to stretch up and take the shorter route to the end of the journey, individual phrases becoming visible as they detach from the mass.

Like the reader of Cavafy’s poem “Ithaca” we may feel ourselves persuaded that in setting these two songs in a remarkable visual landscape of words, Wai Pongyu has made the words our proxy on a journey; one that rewards us by helping us to understand and appreciate better the remarkable incidents and experiences that emerge – especially the affinities it elucidates between all naturally developing forms – even if in their journey they, the words, never leave the confines of the four sides of this remarkable work.<sup>2</sup> Each step of the journey has its element of spontaneity, of unpremeditation. The content of the artist’s decisions in many respects mirrors the factors influencing life’s decisions: what emotion? what logic? what relationships? in a

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<sup>2</sup> “Keep Ithaca always in your mind.  
Arriving there is what you are destined for.  
But do not hurry the journey at all.  
Better if it lasts for years,  
so you are old by the time you reach the island,  
wealthy with all you have gained on the way,  
not expecting Ithaca to make you rich.”

decision-making pattern repeated thousands of times with no real likelihood of any given day being similar, let alone identical to another. Is that how this drawing gains its inner life?

Equally, and very appropriately given the fact that ideographs/words are the medium through which Wai Pongyu has expressed himself, one gains the same sense of the interplay between the artist and his work – the effort, the struggle, the liberation of the work by the artist from its immanent presence – as was evoked by Britten and Piper when they adapted Thomas Mann's 'Death in Venice' to the opera of the same name, and which is described through Aschenbach's feelings on first seeing Tadzio.<sup>3</sup>

“What discipline, what precision of thought were expressed by the tense youthful perfection of this form! And yet the pure strong will, which had laboured in darkness and succeeded in bringing this ... work of art to the light of day – was it not known and familiar to him, the artist? Was not the same force at work in himself when he strove ... to liberate from the marble mass of language the slender forms of his art which he ... would body forth to men as the mirror and the image of spiritual beauty?”

How impossible it would be for such a work to be created by any but the most committed artist, uncompromisingly setting down his vision and the fruits of his long labours.

Paul Serfaty  
Collector

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<sup>3</sup> From the novella 'Death In Venice' by Thomas Mann, adapted in a Libretto by Myfawny Piper