

Pongyu's First Fan Work

In his latest work, Wai Pongyu submits to the discipline of the fan format, which not only allows him to explore the classical side of Chinese art further, but also spurs him on to new ways of expression - in technique, in format, in emotion - that continue to impress the viewer, and project hidden feelings in the guise of tradition.

Three things immediately strike one in this new work: the diversity of drawing technique; the fragmentation of the drawing framework, stretched around the arc of the fan; and the emotional tension in the interactions between its parts.

The sense of an image that emerges naturally, so noticeable in Wai's work, is still there, as are the lines which have so far defined his career and whose subtleties and expressiveness have so impressed his collectors, but now the variety and the way he passes from one technical form to another combine to produce effects and impressions that repay both broad viewing and detailed examination. One's perception of his work shifts as one shifts perspective from a bird's eye view of the textures to close up scrutiny of the details.

Historically, Wai's work has been dominated by the lives of lines. These lines grew in patterns that stretched over the paper. The drawings often absorbed months of the artist's time, creating worlds of their own, havens of relative peace whose evolution during those months had a logical, ordered, inter-related harmony. His work could be seen in the tradition of Zen – one result of spontaneous reaction to the patterns that had evolved line by painstaking line, calling for minimal input of the conscious mind. But it also had a sense of the ordered about it. Lines did not stop and start except at the edges of the work; they were continuous, no matter how tightly bunched they became at inflexion points; and they had visible regular pattern that evolved more or less evenly over time.

Wai's most recent work, continuing the tendencies visible in a smaller experimental piece of mid-2011, seems in many respects to attach itself to the Romantic tradition in ways that Isaiah Berlin, the great Latvian-Russian-British intellectual would have appreciated. Berlin quotes Fichte "We do not act because we know. We know because we are called upon to act." The period of which Berlin spoke, encompassing the *Sturm und Drang* of German tradition, was one in which order, logic, the scientific values of the Enlightenment, had begun to come under serious attack. Stress and strain were valued because they represented human reality, which the Romantics preferred to the perfect but unachievable targets of the rationalists. From this perspective, to be civilised was in no small way to have been castrated. Man should not be bound; and if stresses existed in the world, then battle and friction might result, but should not be retreated from. This sense of the rejection of reason, and the embrace of emotion and its correlative, instability, seem to have grown in importance in the artist's world.

At a first level, it is because Wai adopts a number of new techniques that he gains, through their visual impact and clashes, the means to develop a greater sense of tension, friction, even battle, in his work. At a second level, the need to make progress across the curve of the fan creates an inherent problem for Wai Pongyu's work – how to move through that space – that he resolves by allowing the work to break into a number of areas as it bends. The drawn areas are interpenetrated by spaces, and interact with them in ways that reflect the technical forms of those drawn spaces (are they linear, flocculated, dense, cracked), while the different forms of drawing also give rise to tensions and contradictions between themselves. And at a third level, the movement of the work, now liberated from the strict continuity and integrating effect of the line, evokes a sense of breakage and brings out motion, dynamism, power and thus conflict. This contrast with the calm and order of much of his earlier work adds to its emotional impact, placing it firmly in the Romantic rather than the rationalist camp.

Turning to the technical evolution of the drawing, the four major lobes of drawn space exhibit different textures. Growing up from the bottom left of the fan, we start with the familiar lines, tight narrow, focused. But as we scan the work we quickly become aware that all is not normal. Apart from the

wispy wandering spontaneous lines at some edges of these lobes, we see dense clusters, blocks of slightly congealed areas, the spaces between lines as if blacked out, so as to create negative lines, channels of white space through which the energy of the work flows. Some appear random, but also man-made, artificial in the style of the streets of Venice, following the requirements of the layout of the canals; others are more natural, offering the sense of order of a slightly irregular crystal. These bring to mind cracked areas of drying paint or charred wood, patches of drying or broken ground or the muscle fibres of some mysterious animal.

In parts of the lobes, white spaces swell up between the lines, obstructing their passage, creating spaces around which the energies of the drawing can flow in flurries, leaving the enclosed spaces relatively calm. These flurries can create the impression of smoke or foam, leaving in the mind the kinds of half-seen images of faces or figures that we may imagine in clouds. As you approach the edges of the drawn areas, some of the spaces are fully enclosed, but others seem half formed, or are surrounded by a single fragile line, creating ambiguity about the exact boundary of the drawn space and making space and drawing mutually permeable. In other parts, especially the final lobe, edges of the spaces seem blurry, as if they were the skins of some semi-transparent animal floating in a congealed entanglement of lines.

All these techniques express and betoken stress and strain. As we approach the fourth major lobe of the work, we are conscious that the upper, outer element of the drawn portion of the work, as if thrown round the outer rim of the fan, appears to have been torn apart from the previous one, and that these strains have left fragments in their train, while the pressures within the body of the drawn area seem to have compressed the textures there, and yet further strains are seen as some tension or power has split the hitherto inviolable principle of linear integrity. These lines stretched to breaking, gaps appearing, are things not seen before, especially striking given Wai Pongyu's attachment to continuity in his lines. No longer does a point move to form a line. Full black patches appear, too. This is destruction of lines in two different ways, disappearance into the white and absorption into the black. And the final lobe itself, which brings the movement of lines to an end, seems instead to offer a home for a counter-current of amorphous white swellings that seem to want to move across the fan to arrest the movement of the parts that came before and to strangle the deployment of the lines. What next? Who knows! One of the delights of art is the way artists confound our expectations in acting out 'what we are called upon to act', in the words of Fichte.

One surmises that these dramatic changes in Wai Pongyu's style, visible in the stretching, tensions and compressions of space as the lines unite, or are violated, reflect an underlying sense of tension, of conflicting powers, of violence even, that needed to be expressed in this small and outwardly non-threatening work, in classical form but modern content, that carries within itself great density of power and intensity of emotion.

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