

Pongyu's New Small Work

The work and style of Chinese artist Wai Pongyu continues to evolve new depths of expressiveness and sophistication, reflecting his personal and professional growth.

Specialist collectors are by now familiar with his possibly unique working method, by which the meticulous drawing of fine lines on paper takes on a life of its own, slowly developing over many weeks, often months, to express a combination of literal meaning (where his source is a text or a poem), internally generated emotion (through the varying density of line and pressure) and visual evocation of nature and the physical (waves, lakes, mountains, landscapes, clouds, emptiness, textiles).

European artists have worked in similar ways, but few have combined these techniques as does Wai.

Paul Klee famously took a point for a walk in developing his highly expressive line-based figures that echo Chinese calligraphy and reflect Klee's longstanding interest in matters spiritual and Zen, but he rarely took so many of them on walks so lengthy and so communal. Henri Michaux and the Tachists applied principles of automatism (not infrequently derived from the use of mescaline in Michaux's case) and spontaneity that also reflected their reading of Asian and especially Zen approaches to expression. A willingness to go nowhere formed part of the artistic milieu of the 1950s in which modernism developed and spread beyond the visual arts - in the music of Cage, and Feldman, for example. This was prefigured by the work of Kandinsky, also a lover of Asian ideas, whose elimination of subject matter, form and colour, in his 'black' paintings reflected the abandonment of figuration in Western art. The value of emptiness was also a quality appreciated by Song painters. So things come around.

The interest of Wai Pongyu's latest work, no larger than a study, but reflecting, it seems, much new thinking and feeling, lies in what he no longer does, and what he has allowed himself to be free to do.

Until now, Wai's lines have developed a life of their own, but in harmony with those that came before and came after. Their lives were bounded and within limits. There were beginnings and ends, and each line (no matter how difficult to track) followed a continuous and distinct path across the paper. Where Wai used calligraphy rather than lines, poems remained complete.

In his new work, while the coherence that gave integrity to the lines' life story is still there, the degree of mutual support the lines appear to need to live their lives has diminished radically. Lines emerge from the margins, and may wander into vortices from which they do not emerge; they may spin out, gently wandering into nothingness; they may congeal and gather together to create unclear textures, marring the sense of broadly orderly development that previously reflected a sense of idealism in the world he/they created. Large spaces remain unfilled by any lines - experiences yet to come but unknowable, into which the points spiral or float

uncontrolled by consciousness, reminding one somewhat of the trails created by subatomic particles on X-ray film in the early exploration of the fundamental rules of physics, unknowable, but still subject to some cosmic order.

And despite this, the effect is not to diminish the sense of looking at something natural in the work, but to enhance it, because of the very qualities of uncertainty and imperfection these developments in technique put across. One might be looking at the gnarled trunk of an old tree, its roots reaching down, some old, some feathery and new, searching for water, its body revealing boles that open up in the otherwise smooth annual pattern of growth we observe in nature; parts of the bark are roughened with age and accretions of moss.

Further, unfilled spaces allow effects that hark back to earlier forms of classical painting, and link Wai Pongyu to modern ink masters like Lui Shou Kwan. Lui was adept at using space to create the impression of everything from sky to land to sea to cloud, and Wai's way of dealing with the interface between space and line creates the feeling of a wave crashing onto a crystalline rock, foam marking the margin between the two, rivulets of water running down the paper.

If one were to read a message into the composition of this small work, one might see the travails of growth and learning in the bottom left, facing up to the openness and potential of times yet to come in the empty spaces at top right. In this use of space, Wai respects the lessons of Chinese masters, while his use of textures and the power of expression accessed by looking unflinchingly at loss, pessimism and imperfection extends the artist's reach towards that of mid-20th century Western masters such as Anselm Kiefer.

Hong Kong's art education is unique in offering a real-life fusion of East and West, and Wai Pongyu is an artist lucky enough to have discovered how to transmit the combination of cultures in an individual and yet universal way. More please!

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