

61. Wai Pong-yu (b. 1982)

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"Moment of Truth - The Synergy of Ink, no. 32" 2014

Ink on paper  
73.7 x 53.3 cm. (29 x 21 in.)

When a young man walked through our doors with a few slips of paper under his arm, a mild manner and a winning smile, we were charmed by his gentleness and his sweetness, his bright eyes. We did not expect to also be charmed by the work he was about to show us, but we were. *A Moment of Truth-Synergy of Ink, no. 32* thus became part of the current Kaikodo exhibition, *Elegant Solutions*. And what an elegant, yet unconventional, solution we were shown. Using a ballpoint pen to draw pattern and image on some paper, the results are like a Chinese painting, but also like an engraving by some modern-day Chinese Durer. Really? Ballpoint pen? It reminded me of a wonderful Elizabeth Taylor portrait by Andy Warhol that I once had, a print that Warhol had signed with a ballpoint pen. That was magic. Warhol created magic with a ballpoint pen. And so does Wai Pong-yu.

What attracted us to the image we were shown was its great beauty, one generated by intricately penned lines—accumulative, interwoven, repeated, condensed. Despite the difference in tools—the artist had turned in traditional brushes for ballpoint pens—there was an undeniable visual connection with the "Great Tradition" of Chinese landscape painting. We were looking at an image of a desiccated tree, anchored to a rock with jagged edges, a crumbling surface, with what might be densely clustered foliage clinging to banyan-like branches that appeared to be strangling the old disjointed, disintegrating trunk. One feature that stood out and apart was the isolation of the image against a blank ground, as if it had pulled loose from its moorings and somehow remained suspended in a private vacuum.

The series of drawings, which was begun in 2011 and is an ongoing project and process, began with two works in Chinese folding fan format, which sets up expectations. We expect to see the stuff of Chinese landscape. And in most of the drawings we do. In others, pattern and texture overtake form; the drawings verge on abstraction, and, as some of the artist's earlier works, strike one as being truly abstract. The inspiration or impetus for the drawings might be, according to the artist himself, "a humpback whale, a deep sea squid, tree bark, internal carotid arteries...the moon surface."

This is not to say the artist intended to produce representations of these "subjects" but rather they are the springboards, drawn from the artist's own studies and interests. The lines that stream from his pen seem in fact to live lives of their own, yet in inextricable harmony with one another—almost like a school of fish, moving in a driven rhythmic sequence, in patterns seemingly spontaneous but drawn too by some inevitability, and they might seem the visualizations of sound waves, or ocean tides, or pure rhythm put to paper. Or it might feel as if the ink, the lines, dots, or bits of slag or shards—that is what some of the building blocks look like—are pulled into place like iron to a magnet. But when coalesced into a forms that stream tendrils or the ragged edges of earth, we are pulled back to a Chinese landscape-painting reality that we, steeped in that tradition, can easily relate to.

Whether, however, the image is recognizable and part of the tradition, or abstract, and therefore not, it all starts in the art of Wai Pong-yu with one line, and this concept of the "one line" as the absolute beginning, the source, from which the next line and the next follow, the first line engendering all others, as articulated in writings by the great Qing-dynasty master Shitao (1641-c. 1717), pulls Wai into the fold.

Wai Pong-yu was born on Hainan Island in 1982, moved to Hong Kong when he was two years old, and the next we hear of him he is receiving a BA in the Fine Arts Department of Hong Kong University, his talent recognized by graduation awards he was granted at that time. The year was 2006. It should be note that of his many art practice and art history classes, one in particular struck a cord. This course was devoted to experimental drawing in which charcoal and ink were use to draw the human form and explore, according to the artist "linkages among pattern, ideas and emotions." This led to Wai's abiding interest and obsession with the power of line on a paper surface. By the year following his graduation, he could call himself a professional artist as private and public collections began to acquire his works, and in 2011 he embarked

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on *Moments of Truth-Synergy of Ink*, according to the artist, " a continuous series of drawings in the hope of exploring a state of nature which is beyond our human sensations." This work presents grand juxtapositions and fusions simultaneously of microcosms and macrocosms, albeit in small-scale format. A microscopic view of a bacterial shell, according to Wai, can be placed next to an image of a galaxy whose light might

take millions of years to reach us because they are not contradictory nor incompatible, In fact, quite the reverse. And these are the building blocks of images, most quite easily comprehended within the world of Chinese landscape painting.\*

\*Each member of the series can seen and writings on the artist, a number by Wai himself, found on the artist's website: <http://waipongyu.com>.