

THE INSUFFICIENCY OF TRADITION: PAINTINGS BY FANG ZHAOLING AND CHU HING-WAH (1996)

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Hong Kong art displays a great diversity of style and technique, with everything from Chinese calligraphy to video art being practiced. Even those artists who prefer to adopt techniques and idioms which signify a relation to Chinese artistic tradition, however, are operating within a field where some reference to modernity becomes necessary for an artist of ambition. In most cases, given that the discourse of modernity is Western in origin and emphasis, this has to be achieved by invoking the language of recent Western art, even though this means an involvement with very different visual codes.

In the case of Fang Zhaoling (a retrospective exhibition of whose work was shown at the Hong Kong Museum of Art in November and December 1994), a way of incorporating Western references without letting them disrupt a sense of connection to Chinese tradition seems to have been suggested by her teacher Zhang Daqian. Fang shifted during the 1960s from an emphasis on flower and bird painting in a style indebted to Lingnan school artist Zhao Shao`ang, to a looser landscape idiom which, like the work of Zhang, was indebted to Abstract Expressionism. Before long her own signature style began to emerge, with the amorphous, splashy ink washes giving way to a more energetic gestural brushwork (which is able to allude both to Chinese calligraphic traditions and to Abstract Expressionism). This gestural brushwork does perform descriptive tasks, such as indicating the form of rocks, but it also has a prominence in its own right, serving to bind the painting surface together in an all-over manner. Another way in which this sense of the surface is created in Fang's paintings is through a restriction to a shallower depicted space than one is accustomed to meet in Chinese painting. A very common strategy is for her to place a cliff face directly in front of us, echoing as it were the picture plane, and preventing our eyes from escaping into deep space.

The gestural brushwork in Fang's paintings is consciously analogous to that found in the more free scripts of Chinese calligraphy, but calligraphy also enters her paintings directly, in its own right. The application of calligraphy on the surface of a painting is of course a well-established practice in Chinese art, being particularly well-developed in works of the Qing dynasty, but Fang extends the practice in novel ways. The sheer volume of calligraphy in *Painting and Calligraphy Share the Same Origin* of 1981 is not without precedent, but the way in which it functions to establish not just the plane of the painted surface, but a plane parallel to it within descriptive space (on which the houses seem to rest), is not so easy to relate back to earlier instances. The traditional maxim being used as a title here is in fact providing authorization (or camouflage) for something mildly transgressive of pre-existing painting practice.

Calligraphy is employed in a further novel way in *Landscape (In Memory of My Teacher, Zhang Daqian I)* of 1983) and *Peaceful Settlement of the Future of Hong Kong* of 1984 [1]. In these works, calligraphy is written over the surface of the cliff or mountain faces depicted in the works, instead of being disposed (in accordance with the more familiar practice) in the empty white areas of the paper surface. In *Tai Chi* of 1982 one could read the calligraphy as if it were an inscription on the rock itself (a not uncommon occurrence in China), but in the two previously mentioned works such a reading is not sustainable, and instead we see a mingling of painted and calligraphic marks of a novel kind. The writing helps with the task of indicating texture on the rock surface, as well as taking over the role of creating vertical accents, which in other works is played by a waterfall or steeply climbing footpath.

Chu Hing-wah, a selection of whose 1994 paintings were on show in February 1995 at Hanart T Z Gallery, does not chose to position his work in so close a relation to Chinese tradition as Fang Zhaoling. References to Western modernist art are not so hidden, so anxiously contextualized by signifiers of Chineseness, as in her work. One thinks of Matisse, possibly, or Milton Avery. Nevertheless, perhaps because of an awareness that the discourse of modernity is only likely to offer a marginal place to an artist from Hong Kong, Chu does allow his works to retain something of a Chinese feel. This enters his images through technique, since he employs ink and absorbent paper, those long established elements of the Chinese painting tradition. In addition to ink, however, Chu employs a wide range of colours, and this resource has a far more important place in his work than in that of more traditionally-minded Chinese artists, playing an expressive or mood-making role. A muted feel is present in most of Chu's paintings, and whilst colour plays a large role in evoking this, the reliance on areas of wash, rather than gestural brushwork of the kind employed so energetically by Fang, is also a factor. The lack of line and modelling creates a two-dimensional emphasis in most works, but wash areas are often activated by the application of a further layer of texturing, or by allowing slight irregularities to occur in the application of ink.

Much of Chu's art is concerned with human psychology, in particular with states of alienation or isolation. An implicit critique of modern urban existence seems present, and Chu has undoubtedly been influenced by the many years he spent working as a psychiatric nurse. Faces are often mask-like, allowing no access to inner mood even when a depicted figure is looking in our direction. Although both Chu's and Fang's figures have a 'naïve' quality, the differences are far more obvious than the similarities. In Fang's images we meet happy, busy figures, an idealized notion of community sustainable because of a distance which discourages any attempts at empathic engagement on our part. In Chu's images, on the other hand, figures are characteristically separated from one another visually, and this tends to connote psychological separation in much the same way that a certain awkwardness of execution connotes its psychological counterpart.

Even when he's depicting aspects of the world at large, Chu still seems to paint as if he were observing scenes in an asylum garden, but one should not misinterpret his vision as an unremittingly bleak one. He does show moments of human contact in his images, which are not completely solipsistic in conception. Certain of the works in his recent exhibition even suggest that isolation is not always a negative withdrawal from the world, but can sometimes be the means to a positive communion with it. The relaxing figures in *Fishing* of 1994 or, more directly, the spectators in *In the Museum* of the same year, are enjoying a positive experience of absorption similar to that which Chu is offering us.

Notes:

[1] In the case of *Peaceful Settlement of the Future of Hong Kong*, calligraphy provides a further method for introducing a contemporary feel without the sense that tradition has been ruptured. Here a contemporary subject matter is treated, but reference to it is made only in the inscription. The depicted scene is one which can be assimilated to a manner which wishes to present itself as a continuation of pre-modern Chinese painting, in a way in which tower blocks and container ships could not. The contemporary event which inspired the work was the 1984 Joint Declaration between Britain and China in which the 1997 handback of Hong Kong to China was agreed, and this diplomatic event is treated very 'diplomatically' in Fang's painting.

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