

AN AFTERNOON WITH WONG YAN-KWAI

Gérard Henry

The monsoon rains have hit Hong Kong. Behind the tall windows, always wide open, the rain falls like a heavy curtain, cutting off the studio from the street and from the city. On the balcony, a vine has become entangled in the scrap iron of a sculpture that has been left forgotten there. Paintings, drawings, hastily scribbled cards, collections of objects or words, Dadaist or photographic constructions, with a hint of surrealism, occupy the space in all directions. On one wall, half hidden in the shadows, there is a charcoal drawing, a light and dark maze of blacks, greys and whites with obscure depths and sudden movements, like a piece of light music by Eric Sati. Wong Yan-kwai follows my gaze towards the coloured canvases. He says, "Nobody dares to paint any more. Above all, one must understand ... one must not stay outside the landscape. When Cézanne painted la Montagne Sainte Victoire, it was not actually la Sainte Victoire that he painted, it was the mountain that was inside him..."

Wong Yan-kwai is a painter to the very ends of his fingertips, but that does not prevent him from also undertaking installations, photography, video, or postal art. He does however occupy a very special place in the Hong Kong arts scene, in the sense that his work is free of any local cultural or historical characteristics. Whilst most Hong Kong artists set their work in the social and urban context that is closely connected with their city environment, Wong Yan-kwai follows a personal and demanding quest that is at the very heart of the process of artistic creation – the man confronts the world with his body and his spirit, he attempts to make visible that which seems to everyone else to be invisible. The artist fights this battle with the work that comes from his own hand, in the narrow space between the canvas and himself. It is not just a conceptual or intellectual battle, it is more than that, it is a real hand-to-hand fight, a physical fight with colours, the material, the canvas or the paper, the light. The final outcome is a work that exists in its own right, that has no need for concepts or words to express itself, a work which, to use Paul Valéry's words, "provides its own body".

On this rain-soaked afternoon, a butterfly suddenly makes an entrance, on uncertain wings he flutters around the lamps, towards a large pink, green and yellow painting. Wong asks, "Can butterflies see colour?" Colour is his primary medium – it forms the structure, shape and movement of his work. Vivid and strong, his colours overlap, they confront each other, call out to each other and push each other away with a strong musical resonance that keeps them constantly moving. His painting is not insipid, on the contrary, it is very strong, exercising great power over anyone who looks at it. We might sometimes think that in the many shapes that emerge, we see well-known objects, planes or fish for example, but which have partly lost their shape, their identity, their

characteristic nature. The painter has recreated them, he has made them into simple “objects-colours” with which he freely plays on the canvas.

“I stand outside, I take it all in, and then I squeeze it all out onto the canvas”, says Wong, “there is nothing more real than what I do.” This demanding work brings to mind Matisse’s words - “colour contributes towards expressing light, not the physical phenomenon but the only light that exists, the light from within the artist’s brain”. Wong Yan-kwai exercises great influence over local artists but he continues to tread a very solitary path, away from artistic events where the “curators” prefer an art that has more to say, that contains more social comment, for this genre of artist creates a work that stands by itself and which cannot serve their purposes.

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Translated from French by Bernie Mahapatra.