

THE AUSTERITY AND SENSUALITY OF HONG ZHU AN

Iola Lenzi

The art of Hong Zhu An has gone far toward assimilating and digesting the many conflicting currents that rocked Chinese painting in the 20th century. Though breaking with traditional Chinese painting on a formal level, the artist recovers the essence of the medium taking brush, ink, colour and paper into uncharted territory, revisiting the fundamentals and distilling them to give new voice to the oldest of artistic languages. Whereas traditional Chinese painting evokes mood, sensibility and emotion through the depiction of nature, Hong reduces the language of painting to its purest elements of line and builds a new abstract dialogue between colour-field, space and stroke to convey the same complex spectrum of human emotions. Though the medium deviates from the conventional in subject, the character and flavour of Hong's work remains quintessentially Chinese.

Indeed, Hong's purely abstract works are his most eloquent, relating the intensity of the artist's feelings more potently than the works that include figurative references. Schooled formally in traditional brush painting, Hong, like many of his contemporaries, has also experimented with Western techniques and idiom, systematically analysing and copying Western masters from the Italian primitives to Mondrian. Dismissing as stagnant and sterile the practice of Chinese painting as it was taught at art school -all emphasis on emulation to the detriment of creative freedom and individuality-, he has forged ahead to re-conquer the lost spirit of the medium, its qi and xing (vitality and exhilaration), certain that innovation could be Chinese as well as Western. But whereas Western art's development was a reflection of and a reaction to major social shifts, Hong sought the continuing evolution of Chinese practice at the heart of Chinese culture itself. The Ancient wall paintings at Dunhuang, archaic vessels with their rich patinas, the grains and burnished hues of Ming furniture, traditional folk art, all became sources in his quest to find a way forward and outward for Chinese painting. Though using his exposure to Western concepts as a point of reference, he never abandoned his relationship with the brush, that most fundamental of Chinese relationships.

Above all, brush and stroke are at the heart of Hong Zhu An's oeuvre, the lines a painting's bones. Sometimes the line is clean, so pure it is cutting. Sometimes it is fatter, meandering and whimsical in appearance. In some works Hong's line wanders free, soft, floating in its field of subtle colour. But here lies Hong Zhou An's genius for however free his line, it is above all planned, studied, never arbitrary or random, perfect, immutable and unbroken, an accomplished and uncompromising calligrapher's line, connecting the artist's very modern aesthetic with Chinese painting's formal past. When discussing 'the line' in Chinese painting, Hong is the matador, the line the bull. The artist's work is all about dominating the form, handling the line. Yet control, far from precluding emotion, serves to heighten his paintings' psychological tension. Through his mastery of line Hong achieves an astonishing balance between the dramatic and the pensive, the dynamic and the cerebral. Though he does not use calligraphy in his paintings, the calligraphic line, always vigorous and running the gamut from delicate to forceful, is a powerful tool of expression that succeeds in harnessing the oldest of pictorial histories to a new understanding of form. China has an historic fascination with

writing: its ideographs have unified the land and connect ancient Chinese history with the present. Hong's colour fields sometimes include sequences of ideograph-type marks. Perfectly meaningless linguistically, these symbols are all the more expressive for abstracting the cornerstone of Chinese culture. As pictorially elegant as the real thing and deceptively traditional in appearance, Hong's ersatz pictograms play a subtle conceptual game with the viewer: devoid of meaning, his marks must be enjoyed purely visually. Easy enough for the Western viewer but obliging his Mandarin-speaking audience to 'read' the painting pictorially, without labels, a daunting visual exercise for Chinese painting amateurs unaccustomed to abstraction. The concept is modern but Hong ensures that the challenge is rewarded with a powerful range of emotions quite legible East and West.

The second of Hong Zhu An's tools in his re-invention of the language of Chinese painting is colour. Art-school experimentation with Western impasto led the artist to discover the layering of pigment that gives his work its body and weight. Layer after layer of water-thinned pigment is applied to the rice paper until the artist has achieved desired tone and intensity. The effect is not that of thick or crusty impasto, rather of a subtler third dimension, dense and yet luminous. Because so many colours are juxtaposed, the paintings appear to breathe and vibrate, changing their aspect according to the surrounding light. Acting as more than background, these fields structure the paintings and define their mood. Thus Hong, without resorting to Western perspective, succeeds in giving his works a sort of spatial depth, a rhythmic and poetically Chinese sense of space that offers a lively foil for the his sometimes austere formal strokes. The tones Hong uses are those of traditional Chinese decorative arts and antiquities. The rich greens of Song celadon, the vivid blue-greens of 3000 year-old Chinese ritual bronzes, the milky opalescent glazes of Han ceramics, the deep browns of huanghuali, jadeite from creamy to spinach green, occasionally the red of carved cinnabar lacquer or the iron-red of early Ming under-glaze red porcelain. The technique is contemporary and unconventional but the hues reach back to the dawn of Chinese history. As well as line and colour, Hong Zhu An uses scale to great effect. Large expanses of paper seem to draw out the painter's wit, setting his artistic verve free, though the enlarged scale never detracts from the precision of his brush-work.

Perhaps the strongest conceptual link between Hong Zhu An's oeuvre and that of his traditional fore-bearers is the artist's interest in beauty, his sensibility to emotional expression. Unlike China's avant garde painters keen to engage their local and international audiences in socio-political debate, Hong believes in the intrinsic value of the visually sublime. This is not to say that the artist's paintings are quiet: like music, his compositions evoke mood and emotion, their sensuality commanding attention and imposing reflection. Whereas Western pioneers of abstraction such as Pollock and Rothko broke with over 2000 years of figurative tradition, Hong Zhu An's painting seems an obvious continuation of Chinese artistic genesis.

Although Hong's art is primarily an essay in beauty, his pictogram paintings can be related to the works of contemporary conceptualists such as Gu Wenda and Xu Bing who use Chinese characters or their distortions to develop themes of meaning, truth and identity of Chinese culture. Hong's work however poses no problem of identity. Whereas his earlier painting investigated colour and line as separate elements, his latest scrolls, many included in this exhibition, are amongst his most confident to date. The

relationship between line and surrounding field is finely balanced, suggesting tension and rhythm, sensual, tactile colour planes perfect foils for Hong's precisely-placed strokes. Totally resolved, complete entities preoccupied not with what the artist perceives as transient issues but with the timeless world of the self, Hong's and the viewer's.

Influenced less by locale than by life-events, eleven years outside China and Hong still delves deep inside himself and his culture for inspiration.

Thus, despite its apparent break with conventional Chinese painting, Hong Zhu An's art asserts itself as thoroughly Chinese in feeling, drawing its strength not from its form but from its aesthetic. Intense and emotional in the best Chinese tradition, it has universal appeal, leading Chinese painting past China's borders into the realm of world art. Hong's work pointedly refrains from summoning up the old East vs West dichotomy. It's modernity comes from its uniqueness, its telling of personal stories through vigorous line and throbbing colour. Without being remotely Western, it successfully pulls Chinese painting from its self-imposed shackles, from the tyranny the Tradition has become in the last century.

Iola Lenzi
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