

AN EYE TO THE HEAVENS:

NEW DIRECTIONS IN THE ART OF HONG ZHU AN

Iola Lenzi

For many years Hong Zhu An has been at the forefront of new developments in Chinese painting, his innovative practice peerless within China and beyond in its unique play of colour, space and line. And as Chinese art has moved off in every conceivable direction, so Hong Zhu An's vision, ever steering a steadfast course, has pushed and tested the limits of Chinese traditional painting, defining new artistic frontiers in the use and subversion of the building blocks of Chinese graphic expression: paper, brush and ink.

Hong's painting has in many ways mirrored China as she enters the 21st century: confident, brimming with energy, eagerly embracing the new, and influential as never before. Yet if contemporary China looks to the West in some respects, Hong's art is no East/West cultural hybrid. And though some may claim to recognize the influence of colour-field painting in his work's expressive quality and bold abstraction (1), or glimpse Western modernism in its formal rigour, both the sentiment and hand driving his expression undisputedly find their roots in China, Hong's painting no less Chinese for its universal appeal.

The artist's first great breakthrough was achieved decades ago when he resolved his ground-space dilemma. Superimposed pigments, layered in thin washes, would anchor his line and in dialoguing with it, move beyond the age-old traditional Chinese formula of virgin-paper translating uncertain spacial depth. Hong's signature colours – the celadons of yuan ceramics, azurite and malachite greens of archaic bronzes, rich ochres, ambers and burnt reds of Neolithic vessels-, subtle and never duplicated due to their studied construction of overlaid hues, went far beyond mere technical innovation, recalling elements both precious and fundamental belonging to China's great artistic past and formidable landscapes. Hong had invented an original space. The cultural references glimpsed in his choice of colours were always allusive, amounting to no more than an aesthetic subtext underpinning the whole and devoid of the symbolic resonance ascribed by literati painters to certain natural icons (2). But, more critically, it was in the quest to give new meaning to the line that is the foundation of Chinese art and culture, that Hong truly broke conceptual and aesthetic ground.

Hong, who does not define himself as a conceptual artist (3), was nonetheless as interested in the cultural associations of his calligraphic line as in exploring how its sophisticated technique could be galvanized into a new form of painting. The 'Chineseness' of the line, understood as the inseparability of meaning and materiality, was of particular interest to him. The idea was to disrupt conventional aesthetic code and engage the viewer using a new primal idiom, bringing to mind instinctive references, simultaneously unknown and familiar, as if emerging from a collective universal memory. Poetic and humanistic, these earlier works constituted Hong's archeology of language. Sometimes seeming to recall known ideograms, but only flirting allusively with their

depiction so that even learned Chinese commanding an extensive vocabulary of calligraphic symbols wondered about meaning, his line in these earlier works toyed with the viewer. The resulting visual tension echoed and extended semiotic ambiguity as Hong's stroke simultaneously courted both formal abstraction and the suggestion of reference buried within the pondered marks.

Now, the art of Hong Zhu An, always pioneering, is in a new phase of discovery. Works made in the second half of 2004 move in a distinct direction. Having always been confident and sometimes muscular, Hong's line has not so much morphed as lightened, multiplied and grown wings, concentrating energy and a dazzling quality bordering at times on the ethereal. The artist's hand, once a palpable, controlling presence below the surface of each painting, leading, coaxing, caressing and ultimately dominating the line, however whimsical, loose or delicate, is no longer apparent. Hong has freed his stroke, let it loose, trusting it with independence, and in so doing moved his works closer to the transcendent.

These new paintings are not the pondered, laboured pieces familiar to those who have charted Hong's progress from the start. These are immediate, instinctive and reactive works, their surface urgency and breathlessness superimposed over the thoughtful depth of their ground. Unlike Hong's past oeuvre, they present a tense dichotomy, seemingly three dimensional as would be a deep and secret pool, its surface churning, breaking and violently heaving despite the stillness below. Paintings such as *Autumn Thoughts* (2004), *Rhythm of Life* (2005) and *Fate* (2005) are all speed and raw intensity over their refined ground, reflecting two polarised extremes of a same whole. Their aesthetic direction is new as is their independence from audience, the measured tones of past works' dialogue replaced with a candid revelation of the artist behind the brush. Baring all, with these new autobiographical marks, Hong offers us the utter nakedness that can only be born of great maturity and confidence. From these paintings' potent and sometimes furious energy a graphic clarity and order emerge, and with them the artist's forceful lucidity. Concerned with neither the specifics of time or place, they present spirit and truth, a sort of history of all time, their electrified strokes assaulting the senses and reinvigorating the soul. Beyond their visual sophistication, these works, however abstract, recall the strange and beautiful complexity of life, making them Hong's most entrancing to date.

Nature, as in much of the great Chinese literati painting tradition (4), is evoked by the artist as inspiration, a specific trip to the Indonesian island of Bali mid 2004 prompting his changed reach. But these new markings, frantic, scratchy, convulsively energetic, jumbled, solid, or virile, often seem to spring forth spontaneously from their iridescent ground, exhibiting everything of the random beauty and unpredictable rhythms found only in nature and concentrating all of the latter's extremes in a single work. Returning once again to the line, Hong now harnesses his spare composition to the translation of his own pure energy, perceived as an extension of the physical grandeur and sensuality of the natural world, with the force of a master at the top of his art. Further, the artist's passion, vision and fire permeate these new paintings in a way that is quite new to Chinese painting, an erotic force hinted at below their surface and seeming to rise from their very core. Not branches of trees, but rather their cryptic suggestion, emerge from soft and

sinuously meandering scrawls or violent stabbed scratches of black ink, simultaneously screening, pointing to and lifting the sky and heavens, these tension-laden signs Hong's current metaphors for struggle, strength, sexuality, control and submission.

But if the artist revels in Nature's splendour, abstracting its forms and so striving to capture the very essence of its power and physical presence, he is as interested in the philosophical awe the Natural world inspires as in its aesthetic effect. For beyond the translation of the visually transcendent is a clear reference to the philosophically sublime, Hong's works' visual impact, heightened by their dominating, indeed often overwhelming scale –many paintings nearly two meters in height-, begging the acknowledgement of the indisputable supremacy and intransigence of nature. The artist's use of this grand scale can also be read as a visual prompt designed to recall Chinese painting's great narrative tradition, the comparison serving to underscore his formal and conceptual distance from China's classical art historical trajectory. Similarly, in evoking nature as inspiration for these new paintings, but in categorically denying their identity as landscape images as well as their iconographic allusion to any particular symbols, Hong is pointedly marking his break with tradition.

Indeed, though some may be tempted to compare Hong's attraction to the calligraphic line and repeated exploitation of 'pure' abstract form (as opposed to the narrative) with literati painting's rejection of natural-likeness, conventional representation, and overt technical skill, the broadly drawn parallel must surely stop there. For if in spirit Hong's current work finds echoes in China's great literati painting tradition, his art possibly seen to continue in the line of painters such as the Ming dynasty Dong Qichang (1555-1636) and the later Bada Shanren (1626-1705), it nonetheless distinguishes itself significantly from that of these earlier masters in that it moves away from abstracting nature or using the latter as a visual prop relying on coded conventions for meaning. Instead, it evokes abstract form for its own sake as an intellectual and spiritual continuation of the self, the artist possibly moved by nature's beauty and grandeur but refraining from specifically depicting it. Thus the purely spiritual quality of Hong's vision as the viewer is pushed to discover the very essence of humanity is profoundly contemporary and presents a clear disjunction from all previous forms in the Chinese repertoire.

Hong's love of the line and his understanding of its importance as a fundamental of Chinese artistic expression do not contradict his search for new avenues in Chinese art. Wielding his brush fearlessly even as he charts new artistic territory, Hong allies eye and hand in brave new ways to connect with the age old Chinese sensibility, the ability to converse with nature and make it scintillate on intellectual, philosophical and spiritual levels uniquely his. Hong's works are resplendent because they reveal the beauty of the world, life, and man. From oracle bone inscriptions, to calligraphy, to the underglaze-blue arabesques of Ming porcelain, the line is more aesthetically and philosophically fundamental to Chinese culture than to any other and so crucial to classical Chinese culture that painters spend a lifetime mastering it. Hong's constant working and reinterpretation of the line, beyond paying homage to Chinese culture's historic greatness, is actively engaged in forging its future.

Iola Lenzi
June 2005

Iola Lenzi is a Singapore-based writer and curator specialising in the contemporary art of China and Southeast Asia. She is the Singapore correspondent for the Asian Art Newspaper, London, and a regular contributor to art periodicals in Australia, Hong Kong and Singapore. She is the author of the recently published *Museums of Southeast Asia*.

NOTES

(1) Exponents of mid 20th century American abstraction and abstract expressionism such as Mark Rothko, Robert Motherwell and more particularly Franz Kline were themselves looking to Chinese painting for inspiration and in repudiating Western tradition's interest in rendering three dimensional form, were attracted by the primacy of the calligraphic stroke in Chinese art. Cf. Edward Lucie-Smith, *Movements in art since 1945*, Thames and Hudson, New York, 1985, pp. 46-50 for a discussion of the Oriental influence on post war American art and the latter's cultivation of formal liberation. Conversely, Hong Zhu An's work with the calligraphic line embodies control leading to liberation.

Cf. also Gu Gan, *The Three Steps of Modern Calligraphy*, China Books Publishing House, Beijing, 1990, p. 172 for a brief comparison of abstraction in calligraphy and in Western painting.

(2) Barnhart, Richard, Cahill James, et al., *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*, Yale University Press, London, 1997 p. 8 on the symbolic meaning ascribed by literati painters to certain natural icons such as pine, plum, old tress, orchid, bamboo etc...

(3) In discussions with the artist in Singapore December 2004-June 2005

(4) Ibid Barnhart et al, p. 233 on the importance of nature as a source of inspiration for literati painters.