

New Adventures In Ink Art

by Klyth S. H. Tan

The artist's name is Lam Fung (Linfeng in hanyu pinyin) and mine, Shufeng. Both our given Chinese names make, coincidentally, a strong and rather similar reference to nature. Lam Fung (Linfeng) can be understood to mean "a high range of forest trees" while Shufeng is, possibly, "the apex of a tree." The first instance requires the viewer to stand in some distance to catch the landscape of forest trees. The second involves the viewer taking a closer look at the portrait of a single tree from the ground to the top.

Distance and the axis of viewing come into play. I am reminded of the great Song poet Su Dongbo's piece that is, generally, as read by many readers, about looking at the mountain Lu Shan, entitled "Ti Xi Lin Bi", or "Lines Left on the Wall of West Forest Temple" (this writer's translation as follows):

Horizontally, seen, a range; upwards, peaks
distant, near, high, low; every one is different.
Unable to fathom Lu Shan's true face
in the midst of it.

One cannot see "Lu Shan's true face" when walking in the mountain, as no distant view of it is possible. Recalling his recent contemporary ink painting series 9.3 Million Miles, presented in his solo exhibition Index of Nature, Lam Fung also contemplates the factor of distance: "Often, we're unable to see something not because it is too faraway from our view. On the contrary, we may be too close to it."

Forget about the optical perspective of the vanishing point for a moment. Let the vanishing point vanish as well. Lam Fung's collection put together an abstract contemporary ink series rendered from such a remote point of cosmic view that Old Masters of Chinese painting then could never avail themselves of. Imagine looking back at objects on our planet from the sun, across a prodigious distance of 9.3 million miles, which we know by now thanks to astronomy. Alright, so science precisely takes away the big mystery of the universe, but here, Lam Fung, as an artist, is applying its discovery to create another realm of mystery through defamiliarization. Where the viewer expects scrolls of traditional Chinese ink painting depicting landscape/nature as one 'liveable and travelling' entity in harmony, Lam Fung's series consists of what look like an intriguing range of strange, flat patterns mapped from 'outer space' or even some individual cell organisms magnified by extremely powerful lenses. Instead of any image settling the eye at familiar distances, there is a constant zooming in and zooming out (dis)engaging the viewer's sensory experience across mega- and nano- distances, instantaneously and unusually. Using an abstract, amorphous code of imaging, Lam Fung deconstructs the 'pastoral' tranquillity of traditional Chinese ink in order to activate our contemporary feeling of alienation from a nature that is, probably, no longer 'liveable and travelling' like the way the ancients found it. This body of work effects a different spatial encounter with an 'unrecognizable' nature today, one of approaching life in its multiple particulate forms and proportionate dimensions visualized over 'ultra-natural' distances.

Lest we begin to think that Lam Fung has discarded traditional Chinese painting, however, it is clear he treasures ink as “an organic container and spiritual carrier of memory” without which his current art would be impossible. Paying deep tribute to the Old Masters and founders of the Southern School of shanshui, Dong Yun and Jun Ran, he highly values the flexible, performative brushstrokes of Chinese ink. Its frugality and simplicity are eternal qualities well evident and cleverly re-invented in *9.3 Million Miles*, expressed by Lam Fung as a contemporary practice of “environmental ethics” against the flood of materialism.

Steeped in the training of Chinese ink, Lam Fung was a conscientious student of Tang Yun (1910-1993) and Zhao Shao Ang (1905-1998). He graduated from the prestigious Zhejiang (now China) Academy of Fine Arts with a BFA in 1990. The call of the West beckoned shortly after. He furthered his learning under Professor Maximilian Melcher (then Chancellor) at the Austrian Academy of Fine Arts and was awarded an MFA (1st Class Honours) in 1993. There is no doubt that his trans-continental experiences as an artist-educator (China, Austria, Australia, Singapore and the United States) has awakened in him the urge for “a new aesthetic in ink” based on the personal subjective as well as the global present.

Lam Fung extended his exploration of “a new aesthetic in ink” through transboundary art. Two prominent pieces, “Dissemination” and “Temple Hung On Air” are not, wholly speaking, ink works. They show, nevertheless, as “spiritual carriers” of the artist’s own personal ink “memory”, how the language of traditional Chinese art is culturally and epistemologically transferred by Lam Fung to share an ‘undecidable’ space with science.

For me, “Dissemination” evokes an immediate reference to Jacques Derrida’s famous 1972 post-structuralist treatise of the same name, *La Dissemination*, where he expounded the notion of ‘undecidability’ in deconstructing the hierarchy between ‘essence’ and ‘immanence’, among others. On an interesting note, Lam Fung has said before that ‘deconstruction’ is a tool in his practice, yet not an ultimate. Lam Fung’s modus operandi in this case is, perhaps, one of picking up the pieces to produce a brand new assemblage. What does the viewer make of the traditional ink-related art of moon-shaped Chinese silk fan generated by the temporal light of laser beams now in the same space? Both ink and light are fluid in nature. They meet here in an ‘undecidable’ space of art and science for a new ‘ecotonal’ experience. The ‘frugality’ of ink and the ‘luxury’ of light - synergy or pollution? The artist invites the viewer to ponder.

Lam Fung’s dynamic progression towards “a new aesthetic in ink” may be considered ‘meta-(post) modernist’, a term that has surfaced of late as a tentative contemporary response to the perceived excesses of deconstructionism. The prefix ‘meta-’ does not signal a return to ‘grand narratives’. It could suggest a new ‘undecidability’ after Derridan deconstructionism, one that strives to re-allocate space between the certainty of tradition, optimism of modernism and cynicism of post-modernism. “Temple Hung On Air” is interpretable as Lam Fung’s interactive sculptural attempt at re-installing the ‘floating’ Chinese ink image of a spiritual place of worship lodged in the misty mountains with the modern thrill of anti-gravitational flight motion for an audience grown weary of global travel and living.

What is the irrepressible artist up to next? In *Sequence* promises to unveil Lam Fung’s latest artistic adventures as a founding member of Ink Forum. I can’t wait to catch the prospective spectacle.