

Lan-Chiann Wu: a woman painter in the Chinese ink and brush tradition

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Traditional Chinese painting, women & the contemporary art world

Notwithstanding the great interest that surrounds contemporary Chinese art today, contemporary ink and brush painting, a medium that builds on millennia of Chinese tradition, is not well understood or appreciated in the west.¹ Indeed, in recent years this medium has suffered in popularity even in East Asia as more and more young painters prefer to work in oil or acrylic or to experiment with mixed media. Though we cannot talk of the death of the ink and brush painting (which is still widely practiced in Taiwan and in China as well), it is obvious that in the late 20th century and in the 21st this medium has experienced an identity crises. The roots of this problem and its potential solutions have been much debated in recent years and still are today.² That the crises has been at least in part engendered by the encounter with the western tradition, is clear from the changing linguistic characterizations of the different media in Chinese language. In pre-modern China, ink and brush painting was known simply as painting (*hua* or *huihua*) and was categorized by subject matter (landscape, bird and flower, figure etc), but with the introduction of western style painting it came to be known as *shuimo hua* (ink painting), *zhongguo hua* (Chinese painting) or *guohua* (national painting).³ Other causes are however to be taken into consideration, particularly the progressive self-involvement and aridity of the traditional Chinese schools of painting (such the scholarly wenren) in the 19th and early 20th century, which with few exceptions (like the Lingnan school) lead to endless repetitions of established modes.

Considering the current state of the field, it has been quite refreshing recently to see venues dedicated to promote contemporary Chinese ink painting. The exhibition *Ten Takes on Ink* at the MFA and a related symposium, for instance, encouraged a dialogue between traditional ink painting and contemporary art. The spirit of the exhibition and the symposium, which were to explore and develop connections between Chinese ink painting

and the world of traditional and contemporary art, was commendable, but it was surprising that both venues hardly considered the role of women in this tradition. The near complete absence of female painters was striking. Among the featured artists, only one, Yu Hong, was a woman and she was accompanied by her husband, the noted painter Liu Xiaodong. Yet, Yu Hong is not a *guohua* painter and the piece she made for the exhibition, though inspired by the Song Huizong handscroll *Women preparing silk*, was done with acrylics.⁴

Since I was perplexed, I asked the curator of the exhibition and organizer of the symposium to clarify the reasons for this lack of female representation. Though contemporary Chinese



Figure 1: *Old Street in Sanxia* (1995)

The Art of Lan-Chiann Wu

Lan-Chiann Wu's approach to ink painting is both traditional and idiosyncratic as she has transformed this age-old method through her own personal and artistic experience. Born in Taiwan and educated in the arts both there and in the USA (New York University, School of Art and Art Education), Wu paints in a manner that blends her profound knowledge of the ink and brush method with elements of the western tradition, such as perspective, sense of volume, but more importantly, passion. By bridging eastern and western visual modes of representation, she is able to explore the hidden recesses of the human soul.

This deep emotional involvement is perhaps unusual in traditional Chinese ink and brush painting, a medium that is generally thought to be more concerned with the expression of lofty ideals and where passions are tempered by reflection. However, Wu's sensitivity, though naturally springing from her personal experience, have strong roots in Chinese tradition. Over several conversations and by examining closely her paintings, which are now on view at the Sam Maloof Foundation (*Three Paths to expression*, March 3 – September 30, 2011 at the Sam and Alfreda Maloof Foundation for Arts and Crafts, Alta Loma, California), I learned that Lan-Chiann is the heir to a great Chinese painting tradition, that of the Lingnan school (岭南派). In Taiwan, she studied at the prestigious Chinese Culture University where she was trained by Au Ho-Nien (Ou Haonian) and Ho Huai-Shuo (He Hwaisuo). Au Ho-Nien, a native of Guangdong and probably the greatest living master of the Lingnan school, was a student of Zhao Shao'ang, who in turn had been a pupil of one of the founders of the Lingnan school, Gao Qifeng (1889-1935).⁶ The influence of his style is evident in the earliest of the Wu's paintings, such as *Old Street in Sanxia* (1995, Fig. 1), a city scene painted in 1995, where both subject matter and brushwork point to the Lingnan tradition.



In recent years and particularly after her New York sojourn, her paintings have however moved beyond the manner of her teachers, maturing into an idiosyncratic style. The transition is evident in her painting *Snowflakes Quietly Descending* (1999, Fig. 2), a view of a snow-covered New York street that appears almost as a re-interpretation of *Old Street in Sanxia*. Like in the previous work, the street acts as a catalyst guiding the viewer into the scene. However much is changed, the colors are increasingly assertive and the brushwork though less evident has become more intense. More significant is the introspective mood, enacted by the reversal of movement of the figures, who rather than approaching the viewer, move away into the depth of the street lined by traffic lights that appear almost as traditional Chinese lanterns.

Figure 2: *Snowflakes Quietly Descending* (1999)

This is not accidental: like the street, the theme of the traditional lantern is repeated several times in her paintings. In *Lantern Festival I* (1999, Fig. 3), from a high point above, the eye follows a narrow road that bisecting the painting takes the viewer into the heart of the town. It is nighttime and the street is illuminated by glowing red lanterns held by barely visible figures. At first the scene appears set in a Chinese city, but on further inspections details emerge that suggest a different place. Wu says the painting is based on a view of Florence that she drew when she visited the Tuscan city. But to Florence, she added memories of her childhood hometown, and particularly of her experiences of the festivities associated with the Lantern Festival in Taiwan. There is in this image a combination of structural elements that lead the eye into the depth of the painting and of expressive devices that conjure up an emotional response.



Figure 3: *Lantern Festival II* (1999)

Based on images sketched en plain air and developed into detailed drawings, Wu's paintings are constructed upon a detailed structure of ink forms to which she progressively adds delicate washes and dense coatings of color. The paintings are built layer by layer over months of painstaking work in a process that produces both emotional intensity and a sense of surreal physical space. The results are penetrating and haunting images with an uncanny sense of depth.



Figure 4: *House of Souls II* (2009)

Lan-Chiann Wu speaks about the deep perspective that informs her paintings sensing that the profundity of her images goes beyond the visual and delves into the spiritual. She says: "I paint with the conviction that there are universal humanistic values to life, principles that I grew up with and that are inherent to many societies, which are important to express in my work. Values such as achievement and benevolence, for example, play an important role in my art, because they are at the core of our existence." *House of Souls II* (2009, Fig. 4) is the painting that according to Wu best encapsulates her philosophy. The little island-



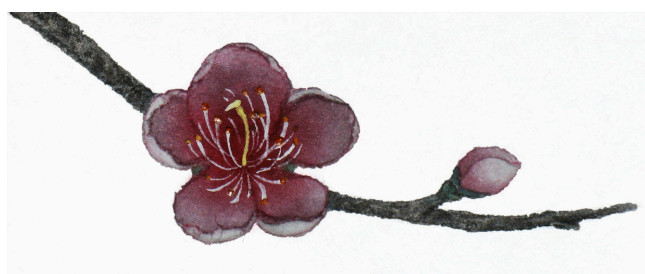
house reflecting on a calm lake narrates of the importance of family ties and the red light that emerges from the open gate appears as a beacon to a homecoming. The light and the setting evoke the 13th century fan painting "Waiting for guests", a dusk scene depicting an evening party by Ma Lin, an artist who embodies the Southern Song romantic ethos that Wu embraces. However, the water that surrounds the scene and the absence of people in Wu's *House of Souls II* suggests that the events unfolding inside the house are private and quite different from those depicted in Ma's painting, where the path illuminated by lanterns and attended by servants and the host visible through the open door act as an invitation to the party.

Figure 5: *Li Bai's Moon* (2009)

Figure 6: *Winter Breeze* (2008)

The echoes of the Song tradition appear also in *Li Bai's Moon* (2009, Fig. 5), a night scene with a full moon emerging through the silhouette of a mutilated tree. The title makes reference to the Tang poet Li Bai (Li Po), a bard remembered both for his lyrics in honor of wine and moon and for his legendary death by drowning while in the midst of a drunken stupor he tried to capture the moon's reflection on the surface of a lake. The moon, an element that like the night often recurs in Wu's images, is a classic theme of Chinese painting. Yet this is not a traditional representation of a Chinese moonscape, it is a modern, urban one. In this moon, one can find resonances of the Taiwanese master Liu Guosong, who in the 1960s painted large images of the earth satellite to celebrate and perhaps exorcise the rush to earth's pale satellite. The mutilated tree hints at something ominous and surreal, like a severed limb or a separation, a hint that appears also in *Winter Breeze* (2008, Fig. 6), a tree branch with flowering winter plum blossoms blown in the wind.

Thick yet light the petals are separated from the branch by blustery air and carried in the wind. Structurally arranged following the best tradition of flower painting yet imbued with contemporary concerns, this image shows how the art of Lan-Chiann Wu (and by extension Chinese ink and brush painting as whole) can fuse two souls into one.



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¹ Joan Kee "The Curious case of Contemporary Ink Painting" pp. 89.

² Wen Fong "The Modern Chinese Art Debate" pp.290-305 .

³ Julia Andrews "Traditional Painting in New China: Guohua and the Anti-Rightist Campaign" pp. 556-557.

⁴ Sheng Hao *Ten Takes on Ink*.

⁵ Marcia Weidner ed. *Flowering in the Shadows*.

⁶ Crozier *Art and Revolution in Modern China*.

For more information about Lan-Chiann Wu's painting visit: www.thetranquilstudio.com