

Then and NOW

Following considerable discussions on ink art in the past thirty years, the art world began to theorise the concept of “ink” on multiple aspects and trace the emergence and development of ink art movements, from the argument of the end of traditional painting to the analysis of ink as a medium, to the invention of such terms as “experimental ink”, “conceptual ink”, “contemporary ink” etc. These perspectives and attitudes spring from the aspiration to set ink art apart from traditional Chinese painting, redefine its cultural identity and find its own voice in this era of globalisation and Universalism.

However, the path to the international stage is not without obstacles, for ink art to enter the mainstream of international culture and at the same time own a place in the system of methodology long established by the West is more than an issue of different viewpoints, it is an intriguing interplay of the condition of international culture and the shifting political landscape. It signifies that the emergence, development and acceptance of ink are not “self-made”, the truth is that ink is meandering its way through the liminal space between “localisation” and “Orientalism”, and only until the last decade has it gained some ground.

From the broader international perspective, China has the potential to become a superpower, surpassing the United States in the next two to three decades. What impacts does a powerful nation bring to its society? Besides political and economic influences, reconstructing the culture is the first step; in particular, we need to look into the multicultural exchanges and engagement, and connect with the well-established Western art system in order to redefine itself in the global context instead of in the regional Chinese language. As a result, the need to be involved in the process of globalisation, including its reassessment of Conservatism and the revival of Protectionism in the contemporary scene, which has long been under the lead of the West, would become obvious. And we need to question ourselves today that, while the competitions of technology, cultures and trades intensify and the superiority of the United States is becoming a debate, has the spell of Universalism of the international society been broken? On introspection, what kind of approach can China offer to the world in its reflection on cultures?

In the field of ink art, withdrawing from the cultural Conservatism and Essentialism is the beginning of rebuilding the national identity, suggesting that Eastern culture is a progressive undertaking and emphasising that the East is a contemporary cultural phenomenon which continues to develop and evolve. In other words, with the emphasis of ink being the unique language of Chinese culture, the foundation of the Eastern cultural spirituality relies on our recognition of the country and nationality. On the other hand, what is held fast to in the race

of chasing and mapping contemporary ink art is not the tradition of ink, but the revered retrospection of Eastern spirituality when globalisation becomes a shared norm in Universalism, or more specifically, when ink becomes a universal creative media.

At the same time, contemporary ink underlines “contemporary expression”, which involves the use of multimedia, connecting science and techniques as well as culture and ideas in the contemporary art scene. Under this framework, this exhibition will go beyond the ontology of ink art and examine the flow of capital in the global system and the discrepancy between political economy and regional structures. This is the relationship between the external and the internal, allowing ink to emancipate from the narrow sense of an art piece and artist, and carry a broader sociological vision.

An Inquiry on Water

The title of this exhibition is “An Inquiry on Water”. Why water? And what is its characteristic? “Water” is the cornerstone of Eastern philosophy and its symbol of the meaning of life, it is also a spiritual vocabulary rich in Eastern culture. Yielding and all-encompassing, “water” begets time and space and gives life to the universe in the Eastern world, it denotes the wisdom and code of conducts in life. As suggested by the Chinese saying “the highest virtue resembles water”, water flows around mountains and obstacles with ease; it fills in dam with stillness and peace; water humbly comes together and can form a tide; it gently wears away rigid rocks. Such unique property not only symbolises the fluidity of the current ink art development, but also attempts to present to the world a paradigm of multidimensional analysis, which, without the hindrance of Essentialism, can serve as a systematic approach to resolve cultural conflicts.

Yet, why and how are we inquiring? Instead of pinpointing on the “ink spirit”, “An Inquiry of Water” is focused on the examination and reflection on the “Eastern origin” and “Chinese culture”. At the same time, it is a probe into exhibitions, art and nationality; namely, it is the question of how to create a meaningful dialogue with Western art, how to construct a comprehensive methodology for ink art itself, and how to illustrate to the world the essence of national culture through ink.

Of course it is difficult to find linkage in such a complicated process, nevertheless, the task can begin with some “metaconcepts”, through which the momentum of universal culture engineered by the transformation of ink art from traditional to contemporary can be measured. Take calligraphy as an example, the idea of “calligraphic expression in paintings” was developed since the Song dynasty when literati paintings became prevalent, and fast

forward to contemporary ink, it has already developed beyond the painting format of merely sacrificing pictorial representation for sentimentality and the free-spirited and calligraphic style, it has elevated to another level of the emotion unleashing and highly spiritual mentality, alluding to the personal expression and pursuit of freedom emphasised in Western Modernism, and consequently complete the process of transformation from traditional ink to expressionistic ink and abstract ink. Therefore, the nature of modern art is not pictorial illustration but human behavior. When representation is no longer the priority, the action of the artists and the process of calligraphy become the definitive content, it is from this angle that we acknowledge the legacy of Western Modernism, yet remain deeply connected to the concept of calligraphy, the essence of Eastern spirituality.

To analyze further, since the worship of concepts by the art world in the last thirty years allows anyone to become an artist, “calligraphy” can become a powerful tool that reflects the ideology of the artists as well as the social cultural evolution. As intellectuals, artists have never enjoyed such freedom of thoughts and individuality in their arts in the past, setting a precedent for conceptual ink art that goes beyond the medium. Today’s ink art unapologetically declares the abolishment of its attachment to form and representation, underlining the potency and profundity hidden beneath. Although the survey of the classical concept of “calligraphy” is only one of the many ways to study contemporary ink art, it enables “An Inquiry of Water” to flow towards the notion of “more than ink”, providing an open-ended platform for experimentation and setting a new path for Eastern spirituality, including the discovery of the potential of ink and its blind spots, and forging the exchange between ink art and international culture through which a deeper discussion of ink art can be addressed. Lastly, it is the aim of this exhibition to enhance the awareness of ink art in the integrated societal and cultural system and search for the spirituality and freedom of ink when it ambles between the East and West, history and culture, and comes face to face with the contemporary conditions.