

# DEEP TRANQUILITY RADIATES SPIRIT

Lampo Leong

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# DEEP TRANQUILITY RADIATES SPIRIT <sup>1</sup>

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There was a kind of cohesive energy existing  
Before Heaven and Earth were ever born.

Without sound and without shape,  
relying on its own force;  
Cycle around, never stop;  
It was the mother of the universe.  
I do not know its name;  
The word I say is Tao.  
Forced to give it a name,  
I say Great.

.....  
Humans are modeled on the earth.  
The earth is modeled on heaven.  
Heaven is modeled on the Tao.  
The Tao is modeled on nature.

– Lao Tzu, *The Tao of Power* <sup>2</sup>

## ULTIMATE SPIRITUALITY

Art is the creation of a spiritual presence within the constructed pictorial space in which the life of a painting evolves. This is the true spirit of *Tao*, to reach a state of unity between the rhythmic vitality of the universe and the spirit of human beings. I aspire to this kind of integrity and wholeness in art – a holistic space where "nature and I become one."<sup>3</sup>

To truly create art, according to the philosophy of *Tao*, an artist must reach a meditative mind of voidness, rising above the dust of the ordinary world and immersing himself in the rhythms of the universe. Rather than trying to control nature, the artist responds to the movements of the natural world. The famous seventeenth-century painter Tao-chi expressed this eloquently. He experienced nature directly and intuitively, allowing his consciousness to merge with the mountains and rivers. Acknowledging nature as the source of his creativity, he identified himself with nature and sought total communion with the universe: "I am able to embrace both the forms and the spirit of mountains and rivers . . . Mountains and rivers seek me out to speak for them. They are born of me and I of them. I gather up all the extraordinary peaks to make my paintings. We meet and comprehend one another in spirit."<sup>4</sup>

Similar to Tao-chi, I see heaven and earth as the substance through which I can transform my experience into the ultimate spirituality I wish to express. The landscape-

like images in my art do not portray a particular place at a particular moment; my landscapes do not present the mere appearance of mountains and sky. They reveal what is beyond the surface, and capture the tumultuous energy within the cosmos and the vibrations of the invisible life beneath the visible world, conveying the spirit of grandeur. As Professor Christina Chu wrote: "Implicit in landscape painting is the mystic harmonization of heaven, earth and man."<sup>5</sup> In my art, the landscape has become "the visible symbol of the all-embracing universe."<sup>6</sup> I consider it my supreme spiritual statement, within which are the symbols of the interacting primary forces that compose the universe, pairs of opposites such as void and plenitude, *Yin* and *Yang*, mountain and mist, heaven and earth. These images aspire to a general truth beyond time and place, symbolizing the eternal cosmos, expressing the sublimity of the land.

## THE MYSTICAL LIGHT OF DREAMS

I acknowledge that modern Western art has had a strong impact on the development of my painting, and has also led me back to my cultural roots in China. Contemporary Western artists often turn inward to search for inner spiritual significance, as do many Chinese painters who find spiritual truth in Chan (*Zen*) Buddhist meditation. It was while studying contemporary Western art that I engaged in an inner meditative process, which led me back to discover a strong sense of Self within my Chinese cultural heritages. While living in the United States, I frequently reminisce on the memories of my homeland. This dreamy nostalgia for my land, culture and history gets stronger and clearer as time goes on. My art, a fusion of meditation and observation, reflects these dreams and memories. Like poetry, my painting portrays a co-existence of inner spiritual and external visual space, and is based both on an intuitive apprehension of the innermost mind and on a perception of images distilled from the external world.

In my paintings, nature has been purified to feelings and ideas in which outward forms and inner impulses have become a unity. These visionary dreamscapes exercise a subjective control on the objects I depict, but "do not lead to a rejection of concrete reality, nor end up as a pure search for form."<sup>7</sup> The purification of reality never breaks the order of the natural world. In these paintings, I have tried to connect intimately with reality, even while I try to transcend daily life and aspire towards the ideal.

These dreamy images in my paintings are dark, serene and mysterious. It is through the subdued, luminous shades of blue, green and black that their moods are revealed. Layer upon layer of color and ink washes, running together on the rice-paper, form the texture and image of mountains and Heavens. These washes flow naturally through the paper, to mold the final shape of the cloud and mountain forms.

The intense, yet diffused, mineral green and blue colors floating loosely in front of a black background achieves a luminous effect as if light is coming from darkness. In fact, the darkness in my paintings gives birth to a light that radiates directly from within the color or emanates from the spaces between. This is my mystical light of dreams, which resonates throughout my art. It is through the ever-changing dawn or evening light on the mountains that I celebrate the mystery of nature. Awake at night, I observe and paint the light of the warm last rays of evening sun or the movement of the cool

moonlight and mist emerging and disappearing among the clouds and peaks. This creative process is not unlike the meditation of a Taoist monk whose contemplation is focused on enlightenment.

An important influence on my dramatic use of light is the work of Mark Rothko, who manipulated light to impart a spiritual, almost religious atmosphere in his paintings. I wish to draw the viewers into my light of dreams, into this intimate and personal place, and to share with them a mystical tranquility. Albert Einstein said:

The most beautiful and most profound emotion we can experience is the sensation of the mystical. To know what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty which our dull faculties can comprehend only in the most primitive form – this knowledge, this feeling is at the center of true religiousness, which consists of a humble admiration of the illimitable superior spirit that we are able to perceive with our frail and feeble minds.<sup>8</sup>

## DEEP SERENITY IN MOTION

According to Chan (*Zen*) Buddhism, in order to achieve a clear vision of a higher reality, one must overcome the bustle of everyday life by maintaining a calm and clear mind. Chan meditation is a way of arriving at that state of mind in which awareness is shifted from the external world to the internal one. The meditative state is one of absolute attentiveness and intense concentration, a freedom that results from a mind of inner certainty. The Chinese vision of the universe reflects this meditative state of mind rather than the object of contemplation. As French art critic Alain Jouffroy wrote: "The work of Zao Wou-Ki [modern Chinese painter] shows us clearly how the Chinese vision of the universe, in which the blurred and far-off reflects the spirit of contemplation rather than the thing contemplated...."<sup>9</sup>

For me, nature soothes rather than excites. It is an incarnation of the spirit of purity and tranquility. My paintings are quiet, no sounds or figures, far away from human presence. My spirit resides within these mountains and cliffs, mist and clouds; I am there, contemplating. The tranquil atmosphere and majestic mountains are monuments to a serene utopia, a path leading to peace and inward calm, the wisdom of the East. As opposed to linear perspective, "in which the viewer is assumed to be exterior to the pictorial space and view the objects in a defined picture plane through an implied window,"<sup>10</sup> Chinese artists strive for a "real" living space in painting where the viewer can not only observe from without, but in which he or she can also live and move about. To the Chinese artists, linear perspective is considered too limited in scope; it seems like a static and deceptive space, a presentation only for the eye. If one paints from a fixed spot one sees only the mountain that lies directly ahead, not the many layers of mountains beyond one's eye. Chinese painters try to create a more expansive pictorial space, truer to physical reality, one incorporating both movement and meditative stillness. They use "shifting perspective", creating multiple focal points, to liberate both artist and viewer from the bondage of the single-point perspective.

I use "shifting perspective" in a very specific way. In these landscapes, only the mid-section of the mountain peaks (or cliffs and mist), with their layer upon layer of rocky outcroppings, are portrayed at close distance. This long horizontal or narrow vertical format is designed to recreate the experience of seeing a mountainscape through time, traveling a distance either upwards, downwards or across the land, as through the lens of a slowly moving film camera panning across a landscape. I enhance the illusion of continuous movement by shifting the viewpoint, so that the eye alights on one place after another. The viewer is allowed no room to stand, but must fly from one point to another, like a bird, shifting his or her view as his or her eyes move across the picture plane. The hills themselves move in a curvilinear, "S"-shape rather than following the traditional Western one-point perspective, a triangular compositional scheme. Therefore, the composition of my painting is not so confined by the four edges of the paper; my images, seemingly without beginning or end, move to the very edges of the paper, even implying an extension beyond. As a result, deep serenity in spirit and slow motion in pictorial structure, brought about by the way I compose, complement each other in my painting. I try to achieve in my art a new unity of deep stillness and peacefulness amidst continuous movement. "Chan Buddhism is absolute stillness in motion and absolute motion in stillness."<sup>11</sup>

## INFINITE RHYTHM

The structure of my painting is simplified, to capture directly the essence and rhythm of nature. Unnecessary detail is eliminated. Professor Michael Sullivan has observed: "The function of form in Chinese painting is not to reproduce the natural shape, but rather to create a denotation or suggestion of its very essence."<sup>12</sup> In this series of painting, the primary structure of each landscape consists of two large shapes representing heaven and earth. The earth and sky merge and re-emerge, the mountain ranges dissolving into mist and the mist moving into the cliffs. A tension is created through these contrasts: hard and soft, mass and void, movement and stillness, *Yin* and *Yang*.

Even though some parts of my painting are representational, the entire pictorial structure, the selection and cropping, are very akin to the abstraction. It is through this abstract aspect that a more dynamic and striking visual impact are able to be achieved.

I have developed an intuitive sense for gestural rhythm through my study of Chinese calligraphy and brush painting. The densely massed mountains are composed of similarly shaped ridges that extend across the picture plane to create an intense, infinite rhythm. Experiencing these images in dense repetition is similar to viewing the ancient Japanese court dance – *Hiramaï*, which is performed by four dancers wearing the same costume and repeating the same steps in unison. When they dance in the same direction, these dancers create four times the density and pattern as would one dancer, but when the four persons dance in four different directions, the effect is compounded in intensity sixteen times. This same compounded rhythmic effect is experienced in Buddhist chanting. When a sutra is chanted repetitively over a long period of time by hundreds of monks, the intensity of the experience escalated. "This shows precisely the point about

intensity achieved by multiplying the numbers of monks and repetitions. Therefore, this sutra's effect accumulated at the temple with an intensity of astronomical proportions."<sup>13</sup> Likewise, the accumulation of repeated forms within my mountain peaks suggest an amassing of spatial intensity and expression.

Rhythm is also expressed through complex, abstract patterning of light and dark tones, or void and solid areas. The void balances form with emptiness, but emptiness that is intrinsic to the painting and is not merely unfilled background. The concept of empty space as a positive element is important in traditional Chinese painting, suggesting limitless space and vital life force. The void serves as a neutral point in space, an integral part of a spatial organization that is almost entirely conceptual. It provides a shifting space through which the calligraphic lines and ink-wash forms expand and interconnect to form an infinite rhythm throughout the picture plane.

## THE VITAL FORCE OF INK WASH

The art of Chinese brush painting is the subtle balancing of line and wash. Chinese scholars throughout history have commented on this vital interplay. "The aesthetic background of the brushwork is delineated in terms of form, line and space-consciousness."<sup>14</sup> Tang Dynasty (Seventh century) artist Wang Wei said, "Shui-mo (Ink and wash) surpasses all. It stems from nature and functions like nature."

The Chinese artist prefers to use monochrome ink wash, sometimes combined with a subdued range of color, because he or she is seeking to capture the internal spirit of color and tonality and to stimulate the viewer's innermost mind to expand towards the essence of nature. A painting may not require an elaborate coloration; it should speak simply from the power of its basic inspiration, calling to the human heart and appealing to the human soul.

Chinese artists believe that while the ink and color washes record feeling and capture atmosphere, the calligraphic line provides internal pictorial structure and strength. Achieved through the power of the brush stroke, line defines form, suggests space, conveys rhythm, captures gesture, and indicates movement. It also reveals the spirit and energy of the painter at that very moment.

Through the overlaying of ink wash and brush stroke, a sense of vital movement and tangible depth is created. The space between the forceful strokes and the layers of blurred ink and color washes forms a new dimension to the work, an ambiguous space that captures an illusion of continuous, billowing or surging movement within an infinite depth.

"Every form, including the tiniest stroke and the tiniest dot, is endowed with meaning,"<sup>15</sup> and every wash, including color and ink textures, "is charged with spiritual significance."<sup>16</sup> The multiplicity of textures activates every square inch of the paper, resulting in a density, a luminous radiance, a presence of opaqueness and transparency. The contrast of delicate material with powerful images is achieved by juxtaposition of these textural variations. The rice-paper, with naturally finished edges, no longer functions like paper but as if it were fabric – an object absorbed by and containing

spiritual impact and physical presence, a self-contained holistic space in which the mood, the life of the medium and the tangible environment, are established.

## SPATIAL TIME

My art is at times a response to music. When I paint, I often listen to music. I like the quiet, primitive yet charming melodies of ancient Chinese wind and string instruments, reverberating in nature, echoing the sounds of wind and air. Their soft, deep tones remind me of places far away in time and space, and touch my soul.

It is universally acknowledged that paintings are to be looked at with our eyes and felt with our hearts, but the Chinese go beyond that. They take the time to read a painting rather than view it, as one opens up a book of poems and savors once again one's favorite lines.

The philosophical and spatial implications of my work can only be fully comprehended through extensive viewing. There is a saying in ancient China, "If one wishes to understand the excellence of something, at first sight one might not be able to fathom anything, but viewing for a long period will reveal its true value."<sup>17</sup> To deeply appreciate this type of painting, one must assume a calm and meditative mood until the inner significance is realized to the fullest. For the Chinese artist, time is a dimension in the appreciation of art.

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In my painting, I intend to impart the ultimate spirit of quietism into soundly constructed modern compositional structures, a synthesis arising from both the Eastern and Western arts. Through my internalization of all the arts and philosophical concepts I encounter in the twentieth century, and the lessons I have learned from the traditions of the East and West, I aspire to achieve a new vision and a pictorial world of my own: I am working towards a new unity of pictorial space, a space where the mysterious light and spirit of serenity radiates from an internal source, making itself manifest in the tangible environment, expanding and filling the entire atmosphere. One can almost hear it, the sound of deep tranquility.

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