

# LAMPO LEONG: THE ENERGY OF THE UNIVERSE

By Tiffany Beres

Lampo Leong has, over the past decades, been highly active in researching and developing the immense contemporary creative possibilities of the Chinese ink painting tradition. His artistic practice embraces both traditional calligraphy, for which he is well known, as well as highly experimental works, including abstract oil painting based on calligraphic gesture. His two recent series, *Inkscape* and *Moving Marks* demonstrate the power of the artist's revolutionary redirection of traditional Chinese ink painting techniques into abstracted extraterrestrial landscape forms and modern calligraphic works.

There is a principle in traditional Chinese painting criticism and connoisseurship that is highly relevant in Leong's latest works, namely that of *mo fen wu se* (墨分五色), literally "one ink encompasses five colors." The inventor of this principle was the great Tang dynasty art critic and historian Zhang Yanyuan, whose *Record of Famous Painters of all Dynasties*, compiled in 847 A.D., constitutes one of the earliest known histories of painting in the world. In this treatise, Zhang emphasizes that ink's "colorlessness" is one of ink painting's greatest strengths—it is not colorful realism that is desired, but rather the *yi* or "mind," the artist's comprehension of the phenomenal world. Leong's monochromatic ink painting series *Inkscape* and *Moving Marks* highlight the artist's ongoing desire to represent the mighty forces of nature in a language all his own.

*Inkscape* is a series that developed as a response to images and photographs of outer space. "I am inspired by Hubble images from NASA and documentaries on the birth of our galaxy such as the *Creation of the Universe*," Leong affirms. "They evoke the ultimate force of nature beyond our terrestrial planet." Inspired by colliding celestial bodies and collapsing suns, Leong's *Inkscapes* bring the majestic beauty and mystery of the cosmos into an evocative two-dimensional representation. Boldly created without color, abstract works like *Inner Vision* draw the viewer's eye because of their intense dark/light balance. Here the fundamental contrast between black and white represent the depth of space, a visually arresting journey across the galaxy. On the surface of the paper Leong is able to capture an explosion of energy—the artist's

journey into understanding of the forces that shape our universe.

Lampo Leong captures the great energy and mystery of the universe with four simple tools: ink, water, paper, and brush—the same tools that ink painting masters have been using for centuries. Thematically, some of these works bring to mind another great ink painter, Liu Guosong (b. 1932), who, in the 1970s began his *Outer Space Series*, the first time a Chinese artist has looked to outer space for inspiration. Both painters depict extraterrestrial landscapes beyond human scale; however, there is a great difference in these two ink painters' works, particularly in terms of technique. Unlike Liu who utilizes man-made, graphic structures—geometric round and rectilinear shapes, often in bright colors, Leong focuses on calligraphic technique and the way that ink runs and splashes on the painting surface—the organic interaction of water, ink and paper. One only has to look at the texture of Leong's paintings such as *Pinnacle I* to see that the hard edges of his predecessor have been replaced by splashed and flowing ink marks. Leong's dappled and directional ink surface is filled with energy and light that seemingly radiate from within the paper.

Another difference between these two artists is that of perspective. According to Leong, "Liu Guosong's compositions are more like looking at the outer space from the earth, but the way I capture outer space is from a perspective that is shifting, up-close and within the universe, as if from a flying spaceship." Leong attributes this change in perspective to our modern day technological advances: "We understand the universe very differently today because we are able to explore the outer space and experience the birth of new planets. I want to capture the expanding energy splashing from these cosmic phenomena. I want to capture that very moment of creation."

To express this otherworldly energy, Leong has invented a distinctive ink painting process that captures directional movement of ink splashes as if pulled by magnetic forces. Leong is very particular about his composition and control: before he begins to paint, Leong has an intention—he creates a sketch based on satellite images of outer space

and envisions the placement of dark and light in his mind. From sketch to final creation, however, there is a large degree of unpredictability. Painted on the floor, each *Inkscape* work is created in a series of washes and splashed ink treatments, each treatment requiring a different gradation of ink or requiring a different angle for application. As Leong paints, he must use his artistic intuition, responding to the flow and spatters of ink, the wetness and absorbency of the paper. The entire painting process is continuous without interruption to maintain the *Qi*, or flow of energy, on the paper, and an entire day may be needed to complete a single work. According to Leong, “There is a kind of serendipitous quality to these works. When I let go of complete control over my brush marks, the water and ink work by themselves to spread, interacting and developing on paper.” Like a chemist in his lab, there is certain mastery and understanding that the artist has over his tools as he applies them, yet there are an infinite number of variations that can affect the final outcome. It is these variations that add to the organic quality of the paintings, says Leong. “I want to capture the feeling that these works are not something painted by human hand, but rather something created by nature, something primordial, which came from the origins of the universe.”

This balancing act between human touch and nature, black ink and white paper, control and unpredictability, is also at the heart of Leong’s *Moving Marks* series. In ancient China, calligraphy was revered as fine art long before painting. The best artists were skilled in both the art of writing and the art of painting since each shares the same tools and philosophy. Leong, who has been simultaneously practicing painting and calligraphy for over three decades, is perhaps best known for his “wild cursive style” of abstract calligraphic works that draw upon texts and phrases from Chinese philosophers, such as Laozi. Leong’s latest series of abstract calligraphic paintings, *Moving Marks*, are a natural progression on previous works. The series title is particularly relevant because the emphasis of these paintings is less on the meaning of the Chinese characters, and more on the energy and feeling of the composition as a whole. In fact, many of the works in the series are

illegible as characters, and the calligraphic marks are simply meant to inspire. In English, the words “moving marks” evoke the feeling of motion and gesticulation so essential in creating these paintings. In Chinese, 墨 (mò) means ink and 勢 (shì) means power or momentum, a title which also suggests the artist’s creative energy as he applies ink to the paper surface.

Unlike Leong’s previous calligraphic series that have a minimalistic, sometimes empty, background, *Moving Marks* is characterized by its calligraphic marks framed in space, a space created by the same ink technique as his *Inkscape* series. In works like *Cursive* or *Resonance*, there is a great contrast between the bold, powerful calligraphic strokes and the mottled inky backdrop. The viewer is pulled into the depth of the painted space, while simultaneously drawn to the surface with all the rich ink textures. There is a relationship between the dark and light spaces, the pronounced brush marks and seemingly spontaneous splashes—a kind of harmony within these internal contradictions. It is this tension that makes the *Moving Marks* series so successful—here

the beauty of the calligraphic stroke finds new life in an *Inkscape* background.

Lampo Leong’s recent works eliminate color in the search for something more pure and refined—a return to the universal energy that composes our galaxy and engenders the artistic impulse. Over a century ago, Zhang Yanyuan wrote, “If by using ink, a painter can allude to the five colors, we say that he has grasped the mind. But if the artist’s mind is fixed on true colors, the essence of all things escapes him.” With his latest “colorless”

series, Leong refocuses his work, not just on primal aesthetic beauty, but on the “mind”, the conceptual meaning within. Previously, in the course of Leong’s career, the artist has explored the calligraphic potential of oil painting, video animation installation, dance with video projection, and other media. With *Inkscape* and *Moving Marks*, Leong returns full circle to his beginnings, focusing on the art that he grew up with—ink painting. On their own, these series are original stories too: they are an inspired exploration of the potential of creation and a fascination with the energy that unites everything in our universe. ■

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Lampo Leong: Gesture XVIII • Ink on rice-paper, 45 cm x 67 cm, 2014