

# LAMPO LEONG'S CONTEMPLATION • FORCES

By Patricia Berger, Ph.D.

Shattered fragments of calligraphy float through veils of color in Lampo Leong's latest series, *Contemplation • Forces*, evoking multiple layers of reference from China's ancient past and from the artist's own complex, multicultural experiences. Lampo Leong is the product of several distinct worlds—traditional and modern China, and the post-modern West. Born in Guangzhou in 1961, he was trained in the classical Chinese disciplines of calligraphy and painting at the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts. There he became expert in two distinct painting styles—the colorful, in-the-moment spontaneity of literati brushwork and the precise, controlled meticulous painting cultivated in the imperial academy. After graduation in 1983, he moved to San Francisco, earning a Master of Fine Arts degree from the California College of the Arts in 1988 and a Ph.D. at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing in 2009. He is currently a Professor of Art at the University of Missouri-Columbia. It was in California that Leong began to develop his unique fusion of traditional Chinese and modernist Western painting into an explosive vision that combines radically cursive calligraphy with stratified fields of translucent color. His technique is similarly eclectic, bringing together classical brushwork, computer-printed imagery, and Western color-field painting in works that evoke the mysterious creative processes of the earth.

In *Contemplation • Forces*, Lampo Leong has returned to the calligraphic sources of Chinese painting to probe the limits of legibility and question how meaning is conveyed or distorted through culturally sanctioned signs. His working process involves deconstruction of traditional forms and a careful reintegration of dissected fragments into a stratified ground. His huge compositions begin as small-scale, traditional inscriptions, done with brush and ink on rice-paper in a calligraphic style that skirts the edge of readable cursive form. Modeling himself on such innovative Tang masters as Zhang Xu (ca. 700-750) and the Chan monk Huaisu (737-799), Leong adheres to time-honored methods of abbreviation, harmony, and balance in building the basis for his final compositions. But he departs from tradition when he splits

his preliminary inscription and painting into pieces and collages them on canvas. Leong then scans this work into a computer and finally blows it up by using a large-format ink-jet printer that faithfully reproduces the movement of brush across paper onto another canvas. His vision has just begun to take shape, however, as he begins to apply layer upon layer of watercolor, acrylic color or oil over and around the calligraphic fragments, patiently building up the surface in an accretion of color, texture, and captured movement that suggests infinitely long and apparently chaotic cosmic processes. Out of the billowing, vivid clouds that roll across his canvases, shards of characters flicker and float, offering the hope of explicit meaning, but in the end remaining hidden, enigmatic, and provocative.

*Contemplation • Forces* is a logical progression from Leong's previous work, which, in his early career, involved meticulous studies of the human figure and flowers, modern heirs of the elegant figural and bird-and-flower paintings of China's dynastic period. Another extended series, *Bronze Age*, used the bronze vessels of ancient China as symbols of a distant, nostalgically remembered past. Set against dynamic, ethereal fields of color, his wine-pourers and tripods focused attention on the notion of cultural continuity in a post-modern, and, for a growing number of Chinese artists, transnational world. Eliminating clear-cut, referential imagery from his work has allowed Lampo Leong to raise his inquiry to a new level of abstraction. His works are palimpsests—texts that are written, erased, broken apart, and overwritten—records of a creative process that is both subtle, complex, and far from direct. As we read them, peeling back their many layers, we are confronted, like the artist's own Daoist models, with elemental matter, swept back to a primordial age, and so to a time of infinite possibilities before meaning was defined and contained.

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