

SyndicateMizzou

Connecting you with the University of Missouri's innovative research and creative activity

HOME INTERVIEWS TOPICS ABOUT CONTENT RE-USE POLICY

Cultural Connections

A visit with LAMPO LEONG, Associate Professor, Art

Published: May 12, 2009 - Topics: [history](#) [calligraphy](#) [Chinese](#) [painting](#) [art](#) [more...](#)



By Tanya Sneddon

Brush in hand, Lampo Leong carefully dips the pointed tip into a small pool of jet black ink. He quickly moves the ink-laden brush towards the dry rice-paper on the table, a thin, tan sheet held down at the edges by paperweights. A brief pause, and then Leong dashes the brush to the paper, the tip and side jumping and dancing across the sheet with intense, determined movements. As the brush reaches the end of the paper, Leong steps back, sets it down, and clasps his hands together. "This is cursive Chinese calligraphy," he explains.

Over 4,000 years old, Chinese calligraphy is China's form of artistic written language. Leong, Associate Professor in the [Art Department](#) at the University of Missouri-Columbia, is a master of this ancient form and has closely studied the calligraphic masterpieces developed during the Tang Dynasty more than 1,000 years ago.

AUDIO AND VIDEO

[Combination of Visual Art and Performance Art](#)

[History behind the Art of Chinese Calligraphy](#)

[Classical Chinese Tools](#)

[Through the Eyes of the Viewer](#)

[Mixed Media Painting](#)

[Mixed Media Installation: *Suspended Marks*](#)

[Multimedia Art](#)

["Lampo Leong Day"](#)

[Teaching Painting and Drawing](#)

RELATED LINKS

[Lampo Leong's Website](#)

[MU Art Department](#)

[Article by the Chinese Cultural Center on Leong](#)

[Suspended Marks at St. Louis University Museum of Art](#)

[Review of Leong's Wild Calligraphy](#)

[Review of Leong's Mixed Media Painting](#)

[Current Exhibition](#)

Leong practices what he calls "wild cursive calligraphy." Not meant for everyday writing, this art form involves a repertoire of theatrical elements in its creation. As he puts it, "the strokes left on paper recorded and reflected the performance of the brush and the artist, almost like a combination of visual art and performance art. Intensity and energy go into each brush mark." This energy, which the Chinese call *Chi* or *Qi*, flows through the art work as the brush moves across the paper with varying pressure and speed; the greater the pressure on the brush, the thicker the mark left on the paper. "The energy flows from here to there, even down here, and then jumps up to the next character. Even if the marks aren't connected physically, the energy must flow across the work," Leong explains, using his finger to chart the motion through one sector of his calligraphic painting.

Innovating, Leong has contributed his own unique style to the art of cursive calligraphy by introducing contemporary painting techniques and elements into the traditional script. He accomplishes this by exaggerating the wet/dry and the thick/thin contrasts of his brush strokes, often causing the bristles of the brush to "curve and flip," an effect that adds both dynamic rhythm and strength to the figures. "My composition is different and has elements of abstract painting; I am very much influenced by Abstract Expressionism in Western art," he says. Another distinguishing feature of Leong's calligraphy is the way in which he treats the background. "I complete the calligraphy first, and then I paint or stain the background with layers of tea or watercolor to create an aged look," he explains. "I want to combine the human touch with something seemingly created by nature."

While Leong embraces much that the West has to offer, he emphasizes the importance of using traditional Chinese brushes, which differ from western brushes in the shape and stiffness of the bristles. "Chinese brushes are pointed and very soft compared to Western brushes, allowing for more flexibility and thus greater manipulation by the artist," he notes. "The brush becomes an extension of the artist's fingers and better reflects the artist's intention at that moment. Furthermore, with the Chinese brush, one can make a tiny dot and a big mark with a single brushstroke; with Western brushes, if one wants a small dot one has to use a small brush, and if one wants a bigger stroke one has to change to a bigger brush," he observes. The ability to use a single brushstroke with multiple variations is essential to maintaining *Chi* throughout the piece.

Another tradition to which Leong adheres is the use of black ink for the calligraphic figures: "Different from traditional Western arts (e.g., Renaissance, Impressionist, etc.) that used an atmospheric color system, traditional Chinese painting and calligraphy use a system that is based on local color. Since black works well with all other colors in the color wheel, it is normally chosen to create the framework in a composition. Furthermore, black provides contrast and brings out the subtleties of other colors, too." Therefore, in China, "black is considered to be the purest form of color." The black calligraphic marks create a visual record that, according to Leong, captures the "training, life experience, and spirit of the artist in these given moments while creating the calligraphic piece."

In addition to incorporating cursive-style Chinese calligraphy, Leong combines various media—such as photography, acrylic color, and oil painting—into a single mixed media painting. “The concept comes from post-modern art,” he observes. “It is a synthesis of different media, different cultures, and different concepts.” To do this, Leong starts with calligraphy, which he then scans into a computer. Next, he superimposes images from nature, including photographs from the Hubble space telescope and microscopes, over the calligraphy, eventually printing the combination onto a piece of canvas. At this point, he adds oil and acrylic paints on top of the superimposed images, creating a mixed-media work. “I am trying to obtain the best of both cultures, the past and the present, and then put them together to create a new visual language that reflects our experiences of the world at this time,” he says.

Mixing Eastern and Western ideals, Leong views himself as an international artist. “My audience is international,” he explains. “My art is not necessarily tailored to one type of audience because it has elements from different worlds and different artistic influences.”

Aside from his calligraphy and mixed-media painting, Leong also creates multimedia installations. While similar to his other works, these installations incorporate a fourth dimension. For *Primordial Encounters*, in the exhibition entitled *Suspended Marks* at the St. Louis University Museum of Art, he made a cluster of large tea-stained translucent silk scrolls with calligraphic markings; he then hung them from the ceiling in a dark space illuminated by a light system above the center of the cluster. The very movement of the gallery visitors as they walked around the room generated slight breezes, which in turn caused the silk scrolls to flit and wave. This type of interactivity marks a shift from more customary convention: “A painting on the wall is still and somewhat remote from the viewer. In an installation such as this, however, viewers could walk into the space, become part of the meditative environment, and actually participate in the creation of the artistic experience,” he suggests.

Whether in the art of calligraphy or in painting, a common thread runs through all of Lampo Leong’s work: the expression of the sublime and the continuing search to reach beyond traditional ideas. As Professor Leong concludes, “the ultimate aim of the artist is to achieve uniqueness in both the artistic expression and the image.”

About SyndicateMizzou

SyndicateMizzou is a one-stop, web-based resource for information on research and creative activity at the University of Missouri. As an electronic hub for news from all areas of the MU campus, it aims to serve a variety of audiences: citizens of Missouri, prospective undergraduate and graduate students, alumni and alumnae, legislators and other governmental officials, and national and international colleagues and institutions. [more...](#)

Give us Your Feedback

Do you have ideas on whom we should interview next? Or how about how we can make this site better? [Please let us know!](#)

Contact Us

Center for eResearch | 243 Walter Williams Hall |
Columbia, MO 65211
573.882.9720 (ph) | 573.884.0291 (fax) |
eresearch@missouri.edu