

THE WILD CALLIGRAPHY

The hallmark of Lampo Leong's art is a restless, questing pursuit of the transcendent and the sublime. This passionate thirst has driven his ceaseless exploration of new possibilities in the fusion of traditional media with the latest advances in digital imaging technology. Yet through all the dramatic stages and new hybrid forms of his artistic evolution, Leong has continually drawn fresh creative energy from his spiritual roots in the art of calligraphy. In his work with brush and ink one may see the fruits of a mature artistic vision deeply in tune with the millennia-old tradition of this most cherished of Chinese art forms.

"Through my calligraphy," Leong has said, "I hope to allow the viewer to share my reverence and wonder before Nature's awesome majesty." And in works such as *Magnificence I*, *Splendor I* and *Grandeur I*, the Chinese-born Leong evinces a deep sensitivity to calligraphy's classic expression of balance and harmony, its association with the majestic spirit of nature. Leong's cursive style calligraphy is modeled after ancient masters Huaisu (ca. 737-800, Tang Dynasty) and Wang Xianzhi (344-388, Jin Dynasty). Because of its long history, Leong says, the over three thousand years during which it has been completely integrated with the daily lives of the people, calligraphy plays a unique role in Chinese culture. Chinese people everywhere can appreciate works of calligraphy for their expressive beauty, their strength, vibrancy, and the intricate balance of the dynamic elements of the art. In his own work, Leong adheres to time-honored methods of abbreviation, rhythm, and balance in building the basis for his final compositions.

Yet even when he is in his most "traditional" mood, the "wild" cursive qualities of Leong's calligraphic style bear witness to the questing passion at the heart of this artist's individuality. After all, in the *kuan cao*, or "wild" cursive script, you have the paradox of a tradition in which every rule is made to be broken!

It is no accident that the names of Zhang Xu and Huaisu figure prominently in Leong's discussion of his spiritual ancestors. These artists broke with the conventions of calligraphy's classical masters to develop a theory that promoted exaltation and unruliness as the prime artistic virtues. In calligraphy, they declared, even the accidents or the drips are manifestations of vital energy, and in their "wild" expressive style, they exalted passion, drunken abandon, spontaneity and even chaos.

Of course Chinese calligraphy had already long recognized the inimitable individual quality of the brush stroke, but for the aficionados of the "wild" style, the individual handling of the brush was held to be the spiritual essence of the art, in his celebrated calligraphic masterpiece *Zixu tie*, or *Autobiographical Essay*, Huaisu, "the Drunken Monk," invoked a series of almost surreal images to describe the wild beauty he strove to realize: "light mists floating among ancient pines, a peak towering over ten thousand mountains, a monkey shaking withered vines, a titanic giant playing with mountains like toys."

It is easy to see how Leong would resonate in sympathy with the great figures of the ‘wild’ style. In their passion for maximum expressiveness the calligraphers like Zhang Xu and Huaisu would twist and deform the characters of the written language to the point of rendering them almost indecipherable. One can see this tendency taken to its logical extreme in Leong’s multimedia work. In large paintings executed in his unique fusion of traditional Chinese techniques and Western Abstract Expressionism, Leong subjects the calligraphic figure to the most violent metamorphoses.

He begins with the calligraphic stroke — but then he cuts this up, collaging the fragments onto other surfaces, blowing them up or submerging them in seething atmospheres of pregnant color. In the multimedia animations of these works, one literally sees these mutable fragments of calligraphy fade in and out of dynamically shifting planes of meditative hues. Moved by mysterious forces, like dancers in an expressionist ballet, the calligraphic figures dissolve in black space or explode to create serenity in an electric manner. “In these works,” Leong says, “I literally enhanced the contrast of the thin and the thick, the dry and the wet of the written strokes. While I continue to pay homage to the spontaneity and strengths of the calligraphic stroke, I also wanted to express my Daoist sympathies in terms of an ever-renewed amazement at the universe revealed to us by modern science. I wanted to stretch the expressive potential of the medium in order to evoke the power and mystery of the creative processes of the galaxy and celebrate the cosmic energies that give birth to new life, new planets, and new stars.”

Driven by a cosmic thirst that verged on mania and delirium, painters and poets of the “wild” cursive school would deliberately get roaring drunk, paint with their hair, or else, in a weird parallel to the work of Yves Klein, drag each other across the paper surface. Yet despite the whimsical or ridiculous lengths to which such artists were prepared to go, it is important to remember that their pursuit was ultimately spiritual in nature.

The quest to realize the sublime as an object of contemplation is an impulse Leong shares with the great calligraphers of eras past. But what seems altogether new here is the way Leong has heightened the inherently dramatic dimension of the calligraphic gesture. It’s as if he’d found an artistic parallel to the way that in English, the word character can refer either to a written sign or a dramatic role. The amazing result of Leong’s alchemical experiments in synthesis is that in the heart of the most cherished of traditional Chinese media he has managed to liberate the drama of Faustian energies latent in the calligraphic figure.

In the best of Leong’s work, the strokes of his brush reveal the invisible by means of the visible. At stake for him as it was for his “wild” predecessors — and indeed, as it still is for us — is the ineffable moment of the creative act, that vertiginous moment when the purest individuality is one with the purest self-forgetfulness, when the surge of spontaneous creativity and the rigorous laws of harmony are in transcendent accord, and when the brush becomes just as much imbued with the cosmic energies of the Dao as it is with ink. In that perfect moment there is a flashing forth of concentrated energy that is no less danced than it is written. And then, wonderfully, we find mysterious forms hovering before us, charged with a vibrating, electrical quality, and challenging us with their crackling, seething vitality of primordial spirits.

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