

Thursday, June 5, 2003

MISSOURIAN

Columbia, Missouri

East & West

An understanding of both cultures allows artist Lampo Leong to create a position between the two approaches

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June 1, 2003

The artist took a last sip of wine and set down the glass. He held the brush in his hand and dipped it into the special Chinese ink. The brush danced over the rice paper, barely touching it, and the calligraphic characters shimmered in bold black strokes against virgin white. A brief moment, supreme concentration of mind and body, and then the work was finished.

“Chinese calligraphy is almost like one of the martial arts — what appears to be only a blur of motion represents years of training and diligent exercise,” said Lampo Leong, an artist born in China and an assistant professor in the MU art department. “In the case of calligraphy, the lines and dots that flow out from the brush seem arbitrary, almost random, but in fact the whole work evolves as a ‘guided accident’ intended by the artist.”

Leong has just finished the first step of his month-long process of painting.

He tears his calligraphic work into pieces, rearranges these fragments on a small canvas, and then scans them into a computer. He uses Photoshop to overlay images, intensify the color and contrast. He prints the file onto another large canvas up to 46 inches by 70 inches with a large-format ink-jet printer.

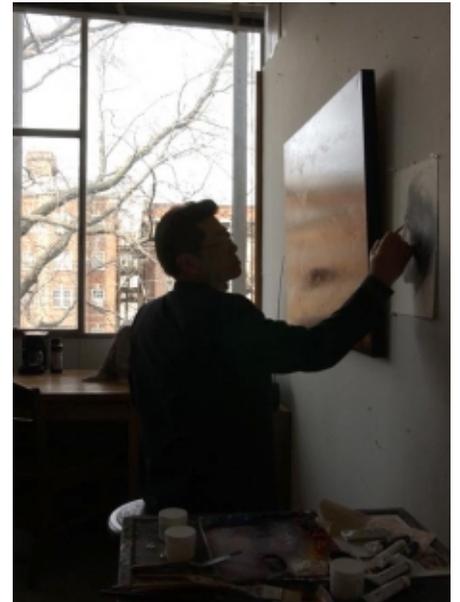
But the painting would not be complete until he applied layer upon layer of acrylic and oil paints over and around the calligraphic fragments, building up the surface with color, texture and captured movement that suggests an infinitely long and apparently chaotic cosmic processes, as described by art history professor Patricia Berger of the University of California Berkeley.

“Lampo’s work is visually strong. It hits you when you see it,” said Nanette Boileau, director of the St. Louis University Museum of Art, where Leong’s exhibition ended on April 20.

Boileau said what makes Leong’s art so different is his multicultural background and his ability to incorporate Eastern traditional art into Western contemporary social settings.

“It’s very important for me to establish my unique position on the boundary between the two cultures — I believe there are incredible opportunities to be cultivated, but in order for that to happen, one has to understand both cultures with a deep empathy,” Leong said.

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[\[see full size image\]](#) Lampo Leong, an assistant professor of art at MU, works on a figure study in his campus studio. (BETH WALSH/Missourian)



Lampo Leong (BETH WALSH/Missourian)

It's a long way to go.

"A journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step," Chinese philosopher Laozi wrote more than 2000 years ago.

These words have served as the cornerstone of Leong's approach to art. His own first steps as a youth on the road of art were taken amid the turbulence of the Cultural Revolution in China.

Background

Born in the southern city of Guangzhou in 1961, Leong grew up in a period when the education system was almost paralyzed. Drawing the image of Mao Zedong and other propaganda pictures in high school was Leong's only opportunity to study art. In the evenings, Leong went to art class, which the school offered to improve students' skills for their propaganda work. This was his earliest art training.

After the Cultural Revolution, he excelled among more than 10,000 applicants and won a place among the 32 students selected by Guangzhou Fine Arts Institute in 1979, one of the three best art colleges in China. After graduating and mastering Chinese painting and calligraphy, Leong felt that he didn't want to follow the road marked out by so many others, but to explore in a direction all his own.

He decided to come to the United States to broaden his views and experiences in art. It was clear to him then that the most exciting developments in art were happening in America, where he could pursue an international career.

He made his way to the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland, Calif., a top-10 master of fine art program in the United States. Some of the teachers there appreciated his painting and others did not. Leong chose to study with those who weren't first receptive to his work.

"I am confident of my ability but want to know what I need," Leong said.

It turned out that criticism from his professors helped him discover the role of the artist's individuality as a creative source and deepened his understanding of himself. His work gained in expressive force. In the end, he earned the approval of 11 professors in his thesis defense, and received the honor of high distinction in his graduation.

With the money earned by selling paintings and teaching art, Leong traveled the United States and Europe to visit museums and historical sites. He thinks it is crucial to see the original work of art, which for him is an important aspect of the artist's motivation.

"Standing in front of the work of a great master you feel the power that was truly alive there once," he said, "You can feel the life-force of a great artist in their work. I want others to feel that when they see my work."

Having devoted years to thinking about the relationship between Chinese and Western approaches to art, Leong has come to view it as a matter of contrasting emphases. He said the essence of Chinese art is calligraphy — gesture — the dance of the line, and Western painting emphasizes space and chromaticism — symphonies of color.

“Leong’s works are far more than a simple ‘East meets West’ combination. Rather, he absorbs each artistic influence, synthesizes them with his own life experience, and transforms them into a wholly unique individual expression,” wrote Manni Liu, former director of the Chinese Culture Center in San Francisco, in a review in Asian Art News.

MU

Leong came to MU in 2001. He is the second Asian faculty member to join the art department since it began in 1877 and the only Asian tenure-track professor in the last 30 years.

He is also one of the leading exhibitors in the department: selected for five solo exhibitions, more than 50 national and international shows in the United States, Europe and Asia, and has received six awards in the last two years. Recently, his department nominated him for MU’s Provost’s Outstanding Junior Faculty Research and Creative Activity Award.

Leong has been working hard to gain these achievements.

“He is the kind of person who is always striving to be the best possible,” said Leong’s father, Songngai Leong, who is visiting Columbia.

“He loves teaching and making art,” said Deborah Clearwaters, manager of Public Programs at Asian Art Museum in San Francisco. “Lampo is one of the lucky ones who are able to make a living pursuing their passion.”

Leong said he conceives the process of constructing an artistic career as similar to the building of a pyramid, and one strives to accomplish the work with the most powerful pinnacle, which for him is to create works that would remain important even after centuries.

He believes a structure meant to endure for centuries requires a foundation that is both solid and capable of evolving. For him, a fresh and open attitude toward new experiences is the key. He tries to learn from everything he does in his daily life, whether it’s computer technology or photography, art history lectures or educational theory workshops.

“I enjoy the challenge of learning new things,” he said. “That is what I like about a big research university that has so many opportunities for building myself into a well-rounded scholar and international artist.”

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