

art

Two Mainland Chinese Artists Showing in New York: Liu Chang at Fou Gallery and Yu HanYu at Ethan Cohen Fine Art

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A generation ago in New York, Mainland Chinese art enjoyed an improbably long period of attention--from the 1990s through the mid-2000s. It was for several reasons: American awe in the face of another great power, especially one with a very great classical history; interest in other cultures (even should it occur on a superficial level); and a curiosity in the work Chinese artists were making at the time, when they drew inspiration from American avant-garde practice. As happens so often with the Chinese reaction to outside influences, Chinese culture was able to internalize what they saw in the art magazines and experienced in America--only to give a new face of its own. Here, in New York, we were mesmerized by the contemporary sophistication--indeed, the avant-garde gifts--artists from Beijing and Shanghai brought to our culture; the most famous names, to think quickly, would be Cai Guo Qiang, Xu Bing, and Wenda Gu. These artists were excellent in picking up American insights--Xu Bing wrote his master's thesis on serial repetition in the work of Andy Warhol--and although they didn't say it, were heavily taken with the way the cutting-edge of the Western- made art.

But, at the same time, something else was happening. The Chinese never really had a modernist period--European, specifically French, end-of-the-19th-century art was important through the 1950s and '60s, at which point other Western imagery began to infiltrate their art with a vengeance. Cai Guo-Qiang's generation came of age in the 1980s, and produced truly memorable art, which existed in opposition to the post-Mao Chinese government, not famous for its liberal readings of Chinese contemporary art. This may have changed--cultural life is freer now that capitalism has been embraced by China, although one still has to take care not to offend the authorities--look at the experiences of conceptual artist Ai Wei Wei in the last ten years!

Generally, though, the Chinese have caught up with a vengeance and are making making very strong work that incorporates insights from technology into computer art--as occurs in the remarkable Fou Gallery show of Liu Chang, a Mainland artist educated in computer art at New York University who is now teaching in Shanghai. Her exhibition, called "The Light of Small Things," makes use of computer-generated imagery printed beautifully by a company housed in an apartment in Beijing. Notable in the show is Liu's use of heat-sensitive paints, which vary in their receptivity to temperature according to the season the image is illustrating. The other show, at Ethan Cohen Fine Art, emphasizes the classical greatness of Chinese painting in the calligraphy and painterly works of Yu HanYu, a self-taught painter based in Beijing. This body of work, on exhibit in the recently renovated exhibition space of Cohen's in Beacon, an hour

north of New York City, relives, reinterprets, and revives the greatness of Chinese art, evident even before the Tang and Song dynasties, its times of highest achievement.

It is true that Liu is an artist who works with up-to-the-moment technologies, even as she reaches back toward earlier Chinese art history for inspiration, while Yu is a traditionalist--albeit one who is entirely dedicated to introducing contemporary energies into his paintings. This review is intended to see how the two artists' approaches might be linked to an outlook that connects to the ancient culture they come from--even if only momentarily. For at least two decades, Western writers made efforts to determine how Chinese the art was--whatever that might mean!--especially in light of an internationalization of their idiom. Many of the most major works of Chinese art, such as Xu Bing's *Book from the Sky*, the fireworks events of Cai Guo Qiang, and the endurance-oriented performances of Zhang Huan, were both global in their implications and specifically Chinese in their origins--this despite the fact that their efforts clearly aligned with the avant-garde, Chinese and Western alike.

The 1980s were a heady time for these practitioners, who were the first generation to come of age after Mao's revolution in 1949. Since the extraordinary, often major efforts of the 1980s, many of which to place shortly before the debacle of the Tiananmen Square massacre crushing the democracy movement, art has split in China into two camps: work embracing the increasingly high-tech internationalism of the present art world; and visions, reinterpreted, of China's past greatness in calligraphy and painting (and sometimes sculpture). What is interesting about both shows--and about Chinese art generally--is Chinese artists' willingness to revive the greatness of the past in ways that may well inherently be *lesser* than the ones they are quoting. This is not the artists' fault; they cannot live as if the Tang Dynasty surrounded them. But they do admit of the past. Liu's exhibition is mainly about the seasons, which early Chinese culture divided in 24 parts, thus demanding a different understanding of seasonal change in climate, while the paintings of Yu introduce a directness and abstraction that feels very much like it comes from the last century's great advances in abstraction--in Western culture--as well as recognizing the past achievements of their own culture.

In consequence, looking at these two artists' connection to the past may well be the best way to understanding what they do. We needn't be scholars to appreciate or understand this work, which functions quite well on a contemporary level. But we do need to be aware of how the art draws from a culture outside and previous to our time, in a way that pays exquisite (if perhaps hidden) respect to a perception still alive after millennia in Chinese culture: the love and understanding of nature. Indeed, nature is central to the work of both artists--in Liu's case we can see general representations of climate and specific examples of flora, while it is clear from the start that Yu's impulses are directly related to the natural legacy he so brilliantly makes use of. At a time here, in New York's art world, where many young American artists feel compelled to make art that refuses to acknowledge previous inspiration, it feels imaginatively inspired for these two Chinese

artists to make use of precedents that inevitably borrow from their legacy. Although New York art critic Arthur C. Danto spoke a bit of prophetic truth when he said art was over, it is also true that art has never died. Liu archaizes new technology to produce art that is experienced as imagistically alive, while Yu's inventive presentation of established idioms can only be seen as contemporary--a new way of looking (also receptive to the past) that proves Danto's pronouncement to be only partially true.

In Fou Gallery, director Echo He's duplex space in Brooklyn, the upper floor, with tall ceilings, holds the show Liu is offering the public. It is about the four seasons, although in early Chinese perception, the year was divided into 24 seasons, each roughly half a month in time. Each of the four walls concerns one of our four seasons, with computer-generated images and, sometimes, a video with earphones. The images range from the naturalistic to the abstract, and, amazingly, given that they are computer-generated, demonstrate a lyric subtlety many viewers would not have thought possible from art produced in this way. It might well be difficult for a generation not educated by or in tune with art developed by cyber-methodologies to feel immediately sympathetic to the show, but the truth is that it is remarkable poetic, as well as being clever in the extreme. Often, the ink or paint used is sensitive to changes in temperature, so that spring and summer require warmth--the heat of the hand--to change the image or make it visible, while fall and winter need colder temperatures, in the form of a small ice pack, to energize the image hidden from sight. The results of Liu's creativity, as printed by the husband-and-wife team NAMES ARE NEEDED, are exquisite. The work *Xiao Man* (date)--in English the translation is *small full*, is a truly graceful image of dark-green stems rising upward and ending in a flattened canopy of foliage. The title of the entire show is "The Flow of Things," and this image, which belongs to the spring, can only stun with its suggestive beauty while acknowledging the inevitable fluidity of time.

At the same time, it must be said that the image is ever-so-slightly mechanized--and a mechanical decorativeness results, here and throughout the show. This is more than likely inevitable, given that the picture was designed on a computer; and it can also be rejoined that decoration is a major part of Chinese art, especially since the Ming Dynasty. It is up to Liu's audience to decide whether this approach strengthens or weakens the lyricism Liu has worked hard to achieve. Another image, *Shuang Juang* (date), meaning *clear and bright* in English, is an outsize, remarkably detailed, and exquisite study of a snowflake, whose structural regularities, fractal in nature, are emphasized due to the construction of the image with software. This does not diminish its beauty in any way; indeed, the method of its facture may enhance it! While it is hard to place the image within a specifically Chinese tradition, we can make the general statement that nature looms large in the Chinese imagination--and that there is a tradition of startling specificity in regard to recording nature in Chinese art. This is exactly what we find here. Perhaps it is too easy to criticize the mechanical origins of the snowflake's appearance, whose subtleties may be exact because they are computer-generated, but which convey an

intuitive vision of the weather. In truth, as it turns out, the beauty of the image's design is so strong as to refute most any comment but one of admiration.

One of the most striking prints, a rose with numerous layers moving toward the center, is pressure- and heat-sensitive: one can alter the image, on a dark gray ground, by touching it with the hand (it goes back to its original shape and color if it is not touched and the temperature of the gallery is not excessively high). The idea of temporarily altering the picture by heat and/or pressure is fascinating; the ability to change what we see makes artists of all of us, even if only for a moment. That Liu's audience can change the picture is an unusual step in conscious collaboration between the viewer and the artist! One might criticize the procedure for being gimmicky and mechanical, but the shift in color and shape actually feels liberating to the person instigating it. Generally, though, the imagery is beautiful not because we can change it, but because it relates to nature, its inspiration, in a radiant manner. This pinkish rose, with its color heightened by the gray-blue ground, is something inherently beautiful to look at. Like all the images on view, its vision of something similar occurring in nature makes it imaginatively specific in a natural sense--and thus strengthens its reality as an image to be viewed. This happens on a regular basis in the show, whose pictures portray a real world of deep beauty--even though the art is artificially made! We can only wonder at the strength of such attraction, being taken with Liu's commitment to both art and technology.

By contrast, Yu's paintings and calligraphy are deliberately traditional even as they refuse to succumb to cannibalizing the past. Yu doesn't imitate actual painters and calligraphers preceding him, but he does follow the general precepts of his culture's legacies (we remember, too, that such a practice was occurring in the Ming Dynasty, more than five hundred years ago, when painters named the earlier artists whose style they were approximating, making a similar activity artificially archaic today). In a way, we have a similar Situation in New York--perhaps "problem" is the better word--now, when the insights of abstract expressionism are being repeated to the point of absurdity. But this situation is even more extreme for the Chinese ink painter, who must acknowledge, if not internalize, thousands of years of art history. Sometimes, the achievement of the past is so strong as to spawn imitations that are large in their own right, even if the contemporary artists do not reach the level of their predecessors. This of course is no one's fault; it is a consequence of time's passage and the inevitable decay that accompanies imitation in art. Just as we have today in New York a painter such as Louise Fishman, whose work is excellent but similar in extreme to the abstract expressionists of the last century, so we have Yu, a painter of great interest and accomplishment, but someone whose work rests heavily on the past. Again, there is no reason to find fault with Yu's achievements because of the situation; it surrounds and indeed envelops him in a way that is impossible to evade.

Yu's large, magnificent ink work, titled *Snow and Frost as the Crystal Jade* (2018), shows a series of rows of wavy white lines that manage to imply both rock lines and frost lines at the same time. There is little finesse here--rather, the audience confronts the lineaments of a strong composition, one that demonstrates the strength of experiment, rather than the reiterations of the past. Seen as a visionary artist, Yu, who is based in Beijing, must know the art scene there well, but he consistently looks back to the past rather than imagining a future not yet perceived. Yet the feeling of *Snow and Frost* is marvelously contemporary, in ways that emphasize the prowess of nature. Looking at the massive crevice and lines of ice crystals that make up the composition, we can only surmise the extent of Yu's patronage of nature, his willingness to take chances, visually, with imageries that internalize earlier art without succumbing to excessive imitation. The Chinese painterly tradition is so very strong, its use in new art inevitably results in works of high energy, rather than images of august reproduction. This is the key to understanding and appreciating Yu's powerful art. Another, earlier ink painting, whose name is *Sharp Lines, Soft Nature* (2012), is oriented toward the depiction of mountains and water that often takes place in Chinese art. Here, too, we sense the flowing energy that occurs in the mountains facing us in the middle of the painting--or the waters with regular waves on the upper right. Above the waters and the mountains, on the very top of the painting, clouds flit across the sky. The feeling is cosmic in a general sense, but it is also specific in its depiction of nature. We know that specificity in art always results in greater strength and depth in the image, and Yu, to his great credit, has mastered the art of particular description, even when the imagery described is entirely an act of the imagination.

Sometimes the art writer feels the need not merely to describe or explain, but simply to praise. Yu encourages this wish because he is so varied in his art and because he balances perfectly across the gap separating the past from the present (and the future!). Given the huge numbers of the Chinese population now at hand, and the thorough exploitation of natural features in China because of industrial implementation, Yu's viewers need to put themselves in a place of praise--that is, they must blur, to some extent, the artist's creativity with that of a past that is hardly evident at all in contemporary life, a circumstance that is most easily understood by praising his ability to join the old with the new. There is also Yu's unusual understanding of nature. Today, this comprehension carries political weight; the lack of natural features, or rather their active degradation, result from the country's relentless pursuit of progress. But it is impossible to blame anyone in particular. Even so, the difficulty of pointing a finger at a cause makes Yu's admiration for the scenes he depicts highly evocative--and elegiac as well. By introducing into public knowledge the imagery of an untamed landscape, he refers to a time when the landscape was both the major theme and the source of metaphor for poets and painters.

Barren and *floating Clouds* (2018) is ostensibly about what its title says: clouds high among tall mountains, although the suggestion of water high up in the horizontal composition arbitrarily brings the overall image closer to earth. In strokes and emotion, this work feels like the cousin of

the outstanding American modernist John Marin, famous for his landscape and seascape studies of Maine. Yu paints here, as he most often does, a scene of nature roiling with activity. Clouds and rocks and water and trees combine with one another, and build an emphatic place of movement. The forms are half-figurative and half-abstract, with mark-making being emphasized. The overall pattern of the composition can easily be read as abstraction, even if the title directs us to a figurative view of the scene. It is a painting that pulses with quick activity, waiting for its audience to complete its energies with a sympathetic gaze. The remarkable ink work titled *Lonely Soul, Cold Moonlight, and Freezing Rocks* (2018) similarly engages us, so that what looks like tall, thin evergreens on a ridge lit by a partially depicted moon communicates nature in a melancholic manner. The composition is magnificent in its irregular design, filling the empty space in ways that emphasize the structure of nature. And, yes, there is too a sense of vast isolation, which might either be the emotional projection of the artist himself, or the consequence of the fiercely described scene of mountainous ridges, pine trees, and waters. Yu has the great gift of seamlessly identifying with what he depicts, so the loneliness described in the title might well be a merger between personal feeling and a nature embodying that feeling.

There is one calligraphic piece, from 2016 and entitled *Song Poetry*, that shows off Yu's brush skills. Although this writer cannot read Chinese, it was possible to recognize the free-wheeling, exuberant freedom of the style, with thick and thin strokes arranged in short vertical rows across the long horizon of the paper's field. *Calligraphy 8, Tang Poetry* (2018) is even looser in its presentation of brushstrokes expressing Tang dynasty poetry; the piece almost looks like a jumble of strokes or part of them, although Chinese readers would more than likely be able to read the text! Calligraphy is much more central to Chinese fine art than Western calligraphy is to Western fine art, so the inclusion of Yu's calligraphic work is important, given this context. In these two instances, Yu comes across as very much inspired, not only by the activity in general, but also by the individual strokes that make up the characters, which are so freely developed. Clearly, in both his calligraphy and his painting, Yu favors a loose, expressive freedom in contrast to a tighter vocabulary. At the same time, the language of both kinds of work is not entirely free-flowing. The point is, as it is always is in Chinese art forms and culture generally, to find a middle ground. Yu's exuberance is moderated and restrained by the history of Chinese art, even if he plays down that aspect of influence in his own work.

How can we sum up the contrasting ways of working by two very exciting contemporary Chinese artists? It is just as possible to join them as it is to separate their achievements, which are high but which have little to share with each other--outside the single, grand theme of nature. Liu is technically experimental--a stance she pulls off by being highly precise in her use of high-tech art. Yu is close to extravagant in his treatment of the Chinese painterly tradition, yet his breaking of boundaries is restrained to some extent by the moderation of the history he belongs to. Both artists use the past to comment on the present, and their courageous attempt to transform and re-use the art they grew up with looks wonderfully lyrical in both shows. Contemporary art

in the West doesn't carry the weight of so long a history, but it is also true that Western artists have become obsessed with newness for its own sake, which may well get in the way of true creativity. Neither Liu nor Yu pander to the past, but they do make use of it in remarkable ways. Unlike New York's ongoing avant-garde, they make it clear that the past can be used very well if it is used with moderation and restraint--qualities that characterize the best of Chinese culture in many ways. In a time when we are close to lost among the myriad immediacies of an avant-garde that hardly feels like one, it is conceivably better to awaken our traditions than to suppress them. The Chinese generally, and Liu and Yu in particular, do this better than almost anyone else.

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