

Interview by Iola Lenzi

Ink on paper is one of civilisation's oldest artistic media, emerging in China over two millennia ago. In recent decades, as social and economic change have engulfed China and globalization has popularised alternative expressive techniques, Western styles have increasingly been embraced by the country's artists, ink and its aesthetic eclipsed in the process. As a result of this challenge, artists working with ink are actively renewing their medium while others seek new voice for its aesthetic. In conversation with Iola Lenzi Singapore artist Shih Yun Yeo, whose works are inspired by the ink tradition, discuss the ancient medium and her faith in its ability to move forward expressively and conceptually.

Iola Lenzi: What initially drew you to ink and its particular visual language?

Yeo Shih Yun: I fell in love with ink in my 1998 Lasalle foundation year, never having used ink before. We had a class and the lesson was to use ink to depict ambiguous space. During the lesson, I experimented with ink, getting different effects by mixing ink and water on watercolour paper. This first experience with ink excited me so much that when I went to the San Francisco Art Institute for my Post Baccalaureate Program (Painting), I had a deep desire to explore ink as a medium. Through that one year, I grew to appreciate it even more, admiring the basic yet strong quality of black as a colour.

IL: Two of you use ink as your main medium: do you feel you are swimming against the tide of contemporary art fashion, and if so, does that affect your practice?

YSY: I do not think so. In fact, I feel that only the ink medium in my works is traditional. Everything else is contemporary. I am working with new ideas using old materials. I am excited by this contrast.

IL: These days, many contemporary practitioners move back and forth across a vast spectrum of media. Do you see Chinese ink and its aesthetic characteristics as fitting comfortably into this varied spectrum?

YSY: Yes, I have painted with ink on canvases, incorporated ink in my hand-painted films by directly painting on them, created videos using a block of ice and just ink. These works fit into the spectrum quite comfortably and I do not feel that my audience notices that I am using ink but rather, sees interesting forms, moving in time and space. The ink medium itself compliments the works but the medium does not play the lead role but a great supporting role. The work, painting or film, plays the lead role.

IL: Documented as far back as the 8th century, abstraction has been a part of China's ink repertoire for over a millennium, seen as the most potent communicator of the visually and emotionally sublime. Here Yeo Shih Yun pushes the random aspect of Chinese painting to its extreme, strapping a brush to a waving tree branch such that when wind stirs branch, a mark is made on paper below. Please explain the purpose of this method and where you got the idea from.

YSY: Since 2001, I have been exploring the creation of marks using non-traditional tools other than brushes. I have used household brooms, frozen ink cubes, balls, water-guns, toys like spinning tops, rollerblades, watering cans filled with ink and poured from a distance, and lately, remote control cars and toy robots. Somehow all these various tools are interesting but still I use my hand to create the marks. I wanted to remove the gesture from it all. I am very influenced by the Abstract Expressionists and note that the macho gesture has dominated this movement. I came across interesting works by Tim Knowles one day- he did a series of drawings using pens attached to the tips of tree branches. I was inspired by this idea and wanted to do it my way by using different types of brushes and ink instead. By tying the brushes on the trees, and at the mercy of the wind only, I have given up control totally. In return, the rewards are beautiful marks of absolute freedom and honesty of the moment. These marks created are then selected by me, scanned and digitalised, re-composed and then transposed to silk-screens. The silk-screens are then screened onto linen, creating paintings. This second stage becomes a collaboration between the trees and me. The trees offered the initial marks, and I work with them to create new paintings with new compositions.

IL: There are other ways of engineering automatic writing. Please explain why you have selected trees as your conduit for your work *Conversations with trees*.

YSY: Trees are full of life. Research and experiments reveal that they have emotions. Also, I like trees' aspect, they have random branches, random number of leaves and random number of roots. I like this randomness. Also like humans, there are no two trees alike. Each is unique.

IL: Your selection of the tree as a vehicle for your automatic art is presumably not random: do you choose the tree as a reference to the central role of nature as a subject of traditional Chinese painting?

YSY: In many traditional Chinese paintings, bamboos and many trees are depicted. In these works of mine, artists are not representing trees or bamboos but the trees are making their own representation of themselves. I like this paradigm shift.

IL: Younger Chinese may not be familiar with traditional painting. Do you consider your work to operate as a means of appreciating the old heritage or do you view it as quite independent?

YSY: In my works, I like to play with positive and negative space, just like the traditional ink paintings. Also I leave a lot of space in my works and this is influenced by traditional Chinese painting. This is termed as "White" or "empty space". In a Chinese painting the empty space is as important as that which is painted. The saying "less is more" particularly holds true. Therefore, you can say that my works do operate as a means of appreciating the old heritage. However, my subject matter, or the lack of one, is a stark contrast to the rich history of themes in Chinese paintings.