

Shi Zhiying

Essay: David Hinton

Shi Zhiying's paintings seem clearly to speak in the language of a modern international tradition, but she is at the same time profoundly influenced by ancient Chinese culture, its art and philosophy. Indeed, her favorite painting is from 11th century China: Fan K'uan's archetypal *Travelers Amid Streams and Mountains*.

This majestic painting from early in the Chinese landscape tradition, overwhelms with its sheer presence: the scale of its towering mountains, the waterfall plunging into empty mists, cliffs seemingly billowing out toward the viewer as if alive with swelling breath, the implied mountain distances stretching back into unseen canyons and beyond.

Like virtually all other paintings in the Chinese landscape tradition, *Travelers Amid Streams and Mountains* was part of a Ch'an (Japanese: Zen) Buddhist practice, both for the artist creating it and the audience viewing it; and Shi Zhiying is herself heavily influenced by Buddhist thought and practice. She has described her desire to "face things quietly, attentively," and this aspiration is also at the heart of Ch'an Buddhism and Fan K'uan's painting. The goal of Ch'an meditation is to still the mind, to empty it of thoughts, for it is only with that quiet empty mind can we "face things quietly, attentively." With this empty mind, perception becomes a spiritual act in which we mirror the world with silent and perfect clarity. This changes things dramatically, for with an empty mind the self ceases to exist as a spirit-center separate from the world. Instead we experience ourselves as part of the world; and at the same time, we inhabit consciousness at a deeper level than our everyday selves, at the level of our truest identity as empty awareness. This experience is heightened in Fan K'uan's painting, and it is central to Shi Zhiying's artistic ambition.

The sheer scale of Fan's painting seems to absorb us into its world, making us feel like a small part of an organic whole. At the same time that it enacts this, making it the viewer's immediate experience, the painting portrays this experience in its images of the human realm woven into the mountain landscape: a monastery (middle right) almost indistinguishable from the rocks and trees, and of travelers (lower right) appearing as an almost unnoticeably small part of this vast world. This integration of self and landscape is encouraged by the complete lack of perspectival structure that fixes the viewer at a single point (that center of self or spirit) *outside* of the painting's space. Instead, the painting includes us within its open space, the gaze of consciousness open and diffuse and able to wander the landscape freely. Finally, as powerfully resounding the mountain's presence is, it is also essentially empty. Unlike a Western oil painting covering the canvas with thick opaque paint that attempts to create the illusion of an actual landscape, Fan K'uan leaves empty space in the composition: the mountain seems suffused in the emptiness of mist, and the rocky cliffs themselves are full of that emptiness, the space between brushstrokes (indeed, Chinese landscape paintings generally emphasize this empty space much more than this painting does). And the way those cliffs are billowing out makes them feel ethereal, like summer cumulous clouds billowing up under the force of thermal winds, forms that we know will soon vanish into empty sky.

Shi Zhiying's large paintings work the same way, though in a distinctively modern and internationalist language of minimalism. They create an expansive perceptual space that absorbs the viewer, much as Fan K'uan's painting does. The paintings of grass fields and sea water open perception to vast distances. Those distances feel almost as if they are breathing horizons of light, while the texture of repetitive but energetic brushstrokes brings grass and water to life.

And as if to make the spiritual dimensions of her work explicit, Shi created another kind of perceptual spaciousness in her images of Japanese Zen gardens. Here the minimalist expanse of fine gravel is punctuated in some paintings in this series by rocks that are meant, as in the gardens themselves, to provide focal points in the empty field of perception. That perceptual field is created

by the texture of lines in the sand, but when viewed closer, the lines come crackling to life (p. 00), dissolving into a texture of gestures: ink sometimes thick and sometimes thin, sometimes smeared and sometimes dripping, creating throughout a gestural grittiness that mimics the actual garden's gravel. This complex surface allows sight to slip through into an emptiness beyond and behind.

In all of these paintings, and again like traditional landscape painters, Shi also limits herself to thin washes and black paint to create that sense of emptiness suffusing the image. And through her minimalist composition, she too offers no perspectival center. But the effect is more dramatic in a way, for she gives the eye nothing to focus on. Her paintings present a single field of repeated elements: ripples and waves, blades of grass, lines of gravel. (Or occasionally they offer one or several centers of focus in the minimalist field, as in the Zen gardens.) This creates a unique meditative effect, emptying the mind of everything but this perceptual fields, thereby returning human to its place as an integral part of existence.

One result of this selfless perceptual practice is that things are seen, as they are in and of themselves, rather than as part of our human or self-centered designs. Ocean is ocean, its waves waves. Grass is grass, it leaves leaves. And Shi's many small paintings of things in the world expand this idea, each thing nothing but itself, whether they are animals or galaxies or human-made objects like bowls and observatories (which are, of course, all about cosmic perception) and religious relics. At the same time, the lavish ways Shi renders these things makes them feel like ritual objects, and so makes the world of things a sacred place. It almost seems as if her small paintings form a single large work, snapshots from a world of things separated by that same emptiness we see in a traditional Chinese landscape painting. And finally, this is what her paintings are about, our relationship to the world around us as a sacred place, and it perhaps culminates in her renderings of standing Buddha figures with draping robes, heavily damaged and yet almost blinding in their incandescence.

Shi's effects are especially powerful in her large canvases of repeated Buddhas, which operate both like the small paintings and the large minimalist paintings. Here, the Buddhas are quite simply what they are, images of the Buddha in wall sculptures from the Caves of a Thousand Buddhas near Dunhuang, a famous area of religious sites in northwestern China. At the same time they form a minimalist field of repeated elements that create that same meditative experience as her paintings of grass and sea and Zen gardens. Shi's execution of these paintings is quite fascinating, because they are again done with highly diluted paint, which gives that sense of absence shining through, as in Fan K'uan's painting. But at the same time, it gives a powerful sense of the erosion of history or meaning. The Buddhas are drained of their specifically religious content and become simply repeated forms. And as empty forms operating in the same minimalist way as her other large paintings, they create that meditative experience at the heart of Buddhist practice, but in a more authentic way, perhaps, as it is stripped of all the false trappings of Buddhist religious institutions and their histories.

So there are two central philosophical impulses in Shi's work: a spirituality of perception and this sense of erosion purifying things of their histories, returning them to their essentially natures as objects that elicit perception pure enough to be considered a spiritual act: spiritual in the sense that it liberates us from the limitations of our everyday selves. Both of these impulses are enacted through her brushstroke, and this brushstroke also comes from ancient Chinese painting. For all the wonder of its overall composition, Fan K'uan's painting is equally revered for the dynamic quality of its brushstrokes at the most detailed level. Calligraphy is the basis of Chinese painting, and calligraphy is all about the energy and virtuosity of the brushstroke. This calligraphic technique can be seen in this detail of a tree's roots from Fan K'uan's painting

Brushstrokes like these were meant to enact the energy of the Cosmos as it flows through all things, and in a sense to caress the essential nature of things. It also quite simply makes the images

engaging for the eye, heightening that sense of selfless perception in which one belongs to that energy of the Cosmos.

The brushstroke serves these same functions in Shi's paintings, though again in a modern context: The gestural texture of her images makes them seem fresh, forcing us to see those images directly in and of themselves, not unlike Jasper Johns' thick encaustic makes us see the American flag as the designed image in and of itself rather than as a bundle of symbolic thought associated with patriotism, war, etc. And in doing this, it makes us experience the act of perception, that liberation of self into the world of things. Shi's gestural brushstrokes also call attention to themselves as brushstrokes, as gestures creating an illusory image. This effect is highlighted by the fact that Shi often allows **paint** to blur and run and spatter. There is no attempt here to create a solid illusion of image or landscape. Instead, her technique invites us to see through the illusion, and once we see through the illusion we are looking into that emptiness suffusing Fan K'uan's painting. This is a strategy many traditional Chinese painters used more dramatically than Fan K'uan, and here Shi does it in an entirely new way.

As we have seen, by applying those abstract gestural strokes with thin **paint**, Shi makes us see the erosion of history, an erosion that strips away all of the context humans have applied to the object, and thereby leaving a pure perceptual object. This erosion also creates the sense of things vanishing from the world, which again draws on ancient Chinese culture. Change and transformation is at the heart of Taoist thought, and for the ancient Taoist philosophers like Lao Tzu, a sage inhabits that change in the deepest way. Rather than experience oneself as an isolated entity outside of the world of change, an "immortal spirit" in the Western idiom, Lao Tzu proposes that we see through that illusory self.

This is the same insight we have already encountered with Shi's interest in perception. When empty mind mirrors the things of this world, we inhabit that same selflessness required to

dwell as part of change and transformation. Shi's paintings enact this entire complex of spiritual experience, enacting a practice of attending to things so deeply and quietly that we lose ourselves and all separation of ourselves from those vanishing things. In that perception one feels oneself as another of those vanishing things. And isn't that the only way we can truly belong to the world, truly dwell in the world of our actual day-to-day lives?