



SHI ZHIYING 石至莹
Grains of sand in the Universe

Shanghai painter Shi Zhiying works mostly with oil paint on canvas, yet her paintings also reference the ink masters of the past. Best known for immersive monochrome oil paintings of subjects such as vast expanses of ocean, or lawns in which each separate blade of grass bends to the wind, she has also experimented with ink on paper. The connecting thread is her Buddhist belief, central to her life and her painting. Despite its contemporary appearance, her work is informed by her reading of Buddhist scripture, her love for ancient art and religious artefacts, and her deep understanding of Chinese tradition.

Shi Zhiying's studio in Shanghai's outer suburbs is a large, quiet space; very, very cold when I have visited her in three successive Chinese winters. Chinese artists are hardy beings. A chair is positioned in the centre of the room where she sits to reflect on her work. Canvases in various stages of completion are propped around the walls and on easels, and the smell of oil paint and turpentine is tangible evidence of intense creation. Working on a large scale with thin washes of blackish oil paint, she creates images of vastness that from a distance appear photographic. Close-up, you see the dribbles and stains of paint and the expressive mark of the brush. Every work reveals her restrained control of her medium.

Born in Shanghai in 1979, as a child Shi Zhiying learned calligraphy. Later, as an art student in the late 1990s and early 2000s, studying in the Oil Painting Department of the Fine Arts College of Shanghai University, she decided that ink-painting was an irrelevant relic of the past, preferring to pore over the work of modern masters such as Cézanne and

Gauguin. Much later, trying to develop her own unique vision, she realised that she had been wrong. It took her some years to find a visual language that combines western and eastern techniques and expresses her own view of the world. In recent years Shi Zhiying has visited Suzhou to study traditional ink paintings and learn from master painters of the past, but her work is also informed by her travels to New York and Europe, and to South East Asia.

Her technique, stripped of inessential elements such as colour, developed almost by accident. For a while after she graduated from university, overwhelmed by different influences, western and Chinese, Shi Zhiying lost her belief in her ability to say anything new or original in her painting. On a trip to America, she regained her confidence. Her architect husband was studying there, and she travelled to meet him in California. Visiting a lighthouse on the west coast, she looked down at the vast ocean below and experienced an overwhelming sensation that she had vanished from the world. This uncomfortable but, she emphatically insists, not unpleasant experience prompted her to study Buddhist scriptures. It seemed to her a clear message that she should return to her traditions, and she began to look for subjects that could reveal essential truths about the nature of the world.

She began taking photographs of the Pacific Ocean, removing the colour. The blue of the ocean and the sky seemed 'fake' – the absence of colour seemed to reveal a greater truth. At that time Shi Zhiying saw Japanese photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto's black-and-white seascapes. His belief that looking at the ocean is a 'voyage of seeing' akin to visiting one's ancestral home⁹ echoed her own feeling. From photographs, sketches and studies Shi Zhiying began to paint the large canvases of seas and oceans which brought her to the attention of curators and collectors. She calls them 'Sea Sutras'.

These paintings of sublime vistas remove unnecessary detail, focusing our attention on the immensity of the ocean – an immersive, almost overwhelming, experience for the viewer. In Shi Zhiying's works, we see familiar imagery – the ocean, a raked path, or an expanse of lawn – in new ways. She works slowly, often making several studies and small versions of a painting before transferring the image to a large canvas. Using very thin washes of oil paint, she controls the drips and dribbles and stains of paint, always aiming for an internal truth. In conversation she likened her particular method of painting to the practice of meditation, 'a slow and peaceful process that takes a long time to develop.'¹⁰

In contrast to these big, ambitious canvases, Shi also paints smaller works representing objects of daily life: a bowl of rice, a plate of food, some discarded clothing, a pair of shoes. Beautifully observed, their lack of colour imbues them with



Shi Zhiying in her studio, Shanghai, May 2011, Photo LG

Shi Zhiying
Zen Garden No. 2 2010
 oil on canvas
 200 x 300 cm
 image courtesy the artist

Shi Zhiying,
Rice (study) 2011
 oil on canvas
 100 x 100 cm
 image courtesy the artist

Shi Zhiying
High Heels 2013
 oil on canvas
 30 x 40 cm
 image courtesy the artist



Shi Zhiying
Cave of Ten Thousand Buddhas 2013
oil on canvas
240 x 180 cm
image courtesy the artist

Shi Zhiying
Egg-white Glazed Porcelain Bowl 2013
oil on canvas, 40 x 50 cm
image courtesy the artist

Shi Zhiying
The Pacific Ocean 2011
oil on canvas
240 x 180 cm
image courtesy the artist

Shi Zhiying
The Universe No. 2 2012
oil on canvas
40 x 50 cm
image courtesy the artist

a compelling stillness. Filling the canvas, her high-heeled shoes represent the appeal of feminine adornment and also its darker, fetishised shadow. Ironically perhaps, her painting of a pair of designer stiletto heels was destined for an exhibition sponsored by a fashion magazine. Shi says she is both drawn to and repelled by the current Chinese obsession with designer brands, and the overtly performative display of femininity found in popular culture. She has been influenced by the monochrome paintings of Yan Peiming, most famous for enormous black or red portraits of Mao Zedong, and by Zhang Enli, who focused on objects of the everyday, finding in the works of these fellow Shanghainese painters a spirit like her own.

Like the literati painters, who pushed the expressive possibilities of ink tonalities from jet black to the palest, most subtle and transparent washes of grey, she is able to create nuanced, painterly surfaces enlivened with gestural marks, stains and drips. There are hints of Burnt Umber, Paynes Grey and Indigo in the dark washes behind large carved Buddha figures in recent paintings. Successive planes and shapes are laid down in layers, building up facets that become a fully realised and modelled form, whether representing a rock, a plate of cheese, a pair of high heeled shoes or an ancient carved deity.

In 2012 Shi Zhiying painted a series of ink-on-paper works inspired by Italo Calvino's 1983 novel *Mr Palomar*. She wanted to use Chinese ink on paper to represent Mr Palomar's quest to discover universal truths and the nature of existence. The 'big questions' of the book, such as speculations about the nature of the cosmos, lend themselves to her subtle, sweeping areas of ink and wash. Mr Palomar sees the whole universe in the blades of grass growing in his lawn. Just as the individual waves and drops of water in Shi's oceans represent a sense of the infinite, so too do her paintings of Mr Palomar's 'infinite lawn', the raked pebbles of traditional Zen gardens, and the individual grains of rice in a bowl. In 2015, she exhibited works inspired by Herman Hesse's 1943 novel, *The Glass Bead Game*, applying the properties of watercolour and oil paint to represent temporal celestial bodies. The title of the exhibition, *I Don't Pretend to Understand the Universe*, is a quote from Einstein, an allusion to the artist's quest for meaning in the events and objects of daily life.

Whether her subject is quotidian or sublime, Shi Zhiying's sense of the oneness of all things in the universe underpins her imagery, and her painterly techniques. She visited Xi'an in 2012 to see Tang Dynasty artefacts in the museum, and made a pilgrimage to the famous Mogao cave paintings of Dunhuang in Gansu Province, a religious and cultural crossroads on the Silk Road. Known as the 'Caves of the Thousand Buddhas', this is one of the best preserved and most extensive collections of Buddhist painting and sculpture in the world, miraculously

Shi Zhiying
The Odd Cloth Shoes 2010
oil on canvas
30 x 40 cm
image courtesy the artist



escaping the wholesale destructions of the Cultural Revolution. Many books with colour plates of the frescoes now lie around the tables and benches in her studio, pages bookmarked and covers stained with oil paint.

When we met for a third time, in the winter of 2013, we looked through these books together, a large canvas with a partially completed draped figure leaning against the wall behind us. Shi Zhiying showed me images of Buddha in various guises, flying apsaras, and other deities, pointing out their complex draperies and their subtle faded colours, dominated by viridian greens and rose pink. Explaining why these paintings are so important to her, she said:

It's another kind of time and space, very different from our time and space. It is much larger... we can feel we are a very tiny grain of sand in the universe. This makes me feel [that] I am nothing... When I feel that I am nothing, I can hold everything, and everything can hold me - it's a good feeling.

Her approach to painting references *wu wei*, a Taoist concept that means non-action, an in-the-moment mindfulness. Clarifying her earlier analogy, Shi says, 'Painting is not meditation. Painting is painting. But it can be *like* meditation because I do it carefully, honestly and truthfully.'

In Shi Zhiying's paintings of Buddhist reliquaries and traditional Chinese vessels, bowls and sculptural forms, at once solid in form and ethereal, lies a desire to distil the true essence of each tangible object. Beneath her large canvases depicting fields of grass, ancient weathered Buddhist caves, or shifting patterns of wind and water, lies a hidden narrative about the complexity and connectedness of the universe and all it contains. Buddhist scripture advises eliminating all that is inessential in order to distil the essence. 'Simplicity is reality,' she says.