

TRADITIONAL GULFS

by CALVIN TAN

As a young painter, Quek Kiat Sing puts a heavy burden on herself in choosing to practice in the Chinese ink medium. This ambivalence and subsequent attempts to evade it is expressed explicitly in her first exhibition where she took pains to state that her works were not meant to be seen through the framework of traditional Chinese ink paintings but were simple expressions of her innermost emotions. Tellingly that first exhibition was called **Moodscape Drawings**. One strategy of evasion employed has been to assert the possibility of adopting only the techniques while asserting that the ideals expressed are western. Hence she states that her works can be seen as 'employing the medium of traditional ink to realize western concepts...'

That this second show bears the title **Shift** is significant for its illumination of her initial engagement with the complex links that her practice puts her in relation to the whole canon of Chinese ink techniques, themes and ideals. In this sense, the key works are the series of 'twinned' works in the *Shift* and *Waiting* Series. Whereas earlier works like the *Shouting* series seemed attempts to skirt or avoid any explicit connections with conventional modes of Chinese ink composition, the *Shift* and *Waiting* series are clear engagements with the tradition. Her sketches prior to the actual painting of these works show that they were composed as one larger work split into two halves. Interestingly enough, the artist had toyed with the idea of displaying them as hanging scrolls in the format of couplets. The couplet format distinctive for its extremely public nature. It is meant to be seen, debated and admired by others. Whatever their final format, the process of creating these works in the artist's mind marks an important step in her engagement with the burden of tradition.

Of course the 3000 year tradition of ink painting is the sum of more than form. Her rising confidence in her abilities is concomitant with a more explicit expression of her readings in Daoist philosophy. In works like *Shift* and *Waiting*, technique is associated with particular Daoist ideals. In her practice, continuous strokes are used to symbolise heaven and the yang, while the broken stroke are expressions of earth (the yin). The tension between these two ideals and her hope for their reconciliation, in essence, their 'encountering' drive all the works in this exhibition. That she is also uncertain of the final outcome can be seen in the yawning white spaces that separate her bodies of swirling ink. In *Knotty Heaven*, the encounter between opposites threatens. The dense circular strokes of the cloud formations above strain to crash down upon the thin, insubstantial earth below, the latter depicted with weaker ink washes.

Another significant change is marked by the move to figurative works, namely the *Lotus* series. In this stage of her career, Kiat Sing has begun to appropriate creatively, conventional subject matter, namely the lotus form, to articulate her own individual concerns. She writes '... it is employed as a sign of oblivion. As the leaves sway in the wind, they are ignorant of unforeseeable change. It reflects the uncertainty of tomorrows but for the present, they dance with the wind.' To dance with wind perhaps best describes Kiat Sing's current artistic development, no more are the evasions and tentative skirtings around the gulfs that separate her from her predecessors in the medium. Comparing a work like *Lotus 2* with *Knotty Heaven* or *Prayer to the Moon*, one sees the joy of the present. In *Lotus 2*, the vision of the world has reversed, the heavens are no longer portrayed with thick, heavy strokes, instead blended ink washes dominate, while the outlines of the large lotus below are broken with dry strokes. Gone are the yawning impenetrable white gulfs that separate her ink bodies in earlier works, in their place are openings and channels that invite. This marks another step in the artistic journey of the artist.

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作为一名年轻的画家，郭洁星选择用中国水墨这个媒介创作，往自己身上压斤。这样的矛盾与犹豫，以致随之而来尝试回避的心理，在她首次个展的作品中便已显露无遗。她解释说，自己的创作仅仅只是反映个人心灵深处的情感，而非单纯叫人欣赏中国传统水墨画的意境。这也就是首个画展命名「情境绘制」之由来了。她所尝试使用的一种解说是：强调采用中国水墨画技巧，但却用西方的表达方法来呈现其作画概念。因此，她说作品可以看作是「运用传统水墨画媒介来表现西方方式的概念」。

这回以《移动》为名的第二次画展是深具意义的。因为这是她对自己从一开始便与中国水墨画的技巧、主题与概念有所联系的一种阐明。在这样的理解下，这个画展中的主题作品要算是《移动》与《等待》系列了。尽管其较前期的《呐喊》系列似乎有尝试回避任何同这中国传统水墨画技巧相关的意图，眼前的《移动》与《等待》系列就是实实在、清清楚楚的表明画家同水墨之联系了。在下笔作画前的素描中，显示出作品是以大幅画创作后才一分为二的。有趣的是，画家考虑以卷轴对联的形式展示。而对联则有公开展示，让人观赏、默想思考与赞美钦羡的特色。不管最终的呈现形式是什么，在画家整个创作的过程中，每一步每一阶段都记录了她在情感、意识与思想上同这个传统媒介割舍不开的情意结。

当然，中国水墨画三千年历史的精彩，绝对不只在形式上而已。在洁星的创作中，她因为能够更清楚的表现道家哲学的精深，而对自己作画的能力信心倍增。在《移动》与《等待》系列中，作画技巧是同道家的哲学思想相关的。在她的作品里，连续不断的一笔一划用来表现乾或阳，而断断续续的笔触则用以表现坤或阴。本质上，这两种概念想法间的张力，以及她对两者和谐的期待，都可以在这次画展中的作品中感觉到。她也不确定作品最后出现的效果能否在与飞舞的墨彩相间的大块大块留白里得以心领神会。在《烦空》里，预示了正反的冲突。象征天上云彩的浓而密圆状笔触，拼命的推挤着底下那以淡薄笔触表现的脆弱地球。

她的另一个重要转变是趋于形象化的创作，如《有荷》系列便是。在此阶段，洁星开始晓得适度而有创意的利用这传统的题材来清楚地说明自己所关心的课题。她写道：「。。。。。。这是无知的象征。当荷叶在风里摇摆，它们对无法测度的改变根本不能了解。这反映了未来的不确定，但当前，它们可以随风起舞。」随风起舞，也许是形容洁星目前的艺术进展之最适当不过的词，这当中再也没有任何回避或不确定的情感拿捏困扰，使她有别于水墨画界的前辈。就拿《有荷（二）》和《烦空》或《祈月》相比较，观赏者可以领会到那种当下的欢愉和喜悦。在《有荷（二）》里，画家对世界的想象全然改变，天空不再以厚重的笔触来表现，而是以淡雅水墨作为象征，至于大朵大朵荷叶的轮廓，用的是断断续续的笔触。过去常用难以渗透的大块留白手法已不复存在，取而代之的是许多敞开的线条空间。这同样也标志着画家在艺术道路上的成长足迹。

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