

JCP SPECIAL ISSUE

Painting as a transcultural dialogue

JCP EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

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This Special Issue of JCP does not aim to be comprehensive in its exploration of global dialogues within modern and contemporary painting. It comprises a series of 'snap-shots', which together give a sense of the richness of these interactions. We focus mostly on China, Taiwan, and Korea, with a notable detour down towards the Philippines. In order to place contemporary practice in context, we also take a couple of trips into the deeper past to visit Qing Dynasty landscape painting in China, and the more recent past to explore of the impact of Zen on Western monochrome painters in the 1950s and 1960s.

In the controversial book from 2010 from which this issue of the JCP re-publishes an extract, the American art historian James Elkins concluded that the deep-rooted Western conventions that inhere in any encounter between Western art history and Chinese traditional art must inevitably inhibit the investigation of the Chinese works themselves on their own terms, or in relation to the ideas that informed them. For, so Elkins argues (2010; 139), while "it is true that we all see brushstrokes, flat surfaces, spatial cues, compositions, and so forth [...] the *naming* of such elements, the *structure of our analysis*, and the conviction that we are doing something that is phenomenologically fundamental to a perception of art, are all Western." In the chapter republished here, Elkins focuses on the Late Ming and Qing Dynasties in China during the seventeenth century, and develops an argument that sees the art of that period as in many ways possessing characteristics that much later in the West were dubbed 'postmodern', a recent tendency in art within whose shadow Elkins was writing his book. Elkins discusses the 'endgame' metaphor, which is most closely associated with the writings of Hubert Damisch and Yve-Alain Bois, and suggests

certain compelling transcultural and transhistorical parallels, in which the Chinese art can teach us something about the contemporary Western development. But Elkins then steps back, and concludes: “My story has been driven by an interest in locating the large-scale structures within the histories of Western and Chinese painting, and I know that interest comes from Western historiography and philosophy of history.....None of that means the comparison is wrong. It just makes me wonder whether I am, as the psychoanalysts used to say, projecting.” This was what made Elkins book so controversial: if non-Western art is inevitably assessed in terms of historical stylistic comparisons and from within a single Western master narrative, fundamental cultural differences and hierarchies make art history an imperial Western venture, and so art historical discourse is inevitably nothing more than an essentially local dialogue.

We also publish a text by Jennifer Purtle, an Associate Professor of Chinese and East Asian Art History, who wrote the original Foreword to Elkin’s book. Ten years later she re-visits it to argue that the issues Elkins raised, and the questions she then asked, are even more pressingly in need of answers today. She observes: “Elkins’s book is a case study of what happens when the things are Chinese landscape paintings, and the discursive field is Western art history, and his object lesson is one in which alien epistemological structures and hermeneutic practices defined the study of the history of Chinese landscape painting. It is precisely this point that Elkins made in his controversial text; ten years later, the point is no less significant, but now falls firmly within the mainstream critique of art history as a discipline.” Purtle notes that today Western art historians are generally more aware of what were previously latent and unexamined biases in their thinking when addressing world art, a process she terms the “decolonization of art history”.

Purtle points to two recent developments that serve to distinguish the current situation from the period in which Elkins was framing his argument: the critique of the concept of the ‘global’ and the acceptance of ‘the slippage between culturally-specific terms.’ She also points to absence of indigenous modern Chinese scholarship in Elkins book, a reflection of the limited potential for academic dialogue at the time. Since then, the field has grown significantly. As a substantiation of this change, we also publish an essay by Zang Yingchun from Tsinghua University in Beijing. She begins by asking probing questions: “What role does Western art

play in the history of Chinese art? What is the origin, development and future direction of Chinese art? How did the arts of the East and the West meet, collide and merge in different historical periods? Are these two sides of the same coin, different but inseparable?" She goes on to argue for hermeneutic parallelism rather than convergence or submergence within a grand global metanarrative.

Elkins (2006) has also written of the problems that arise in assessing the works by modern non-Western artists before the period of contemporary globalization began in the 1980s. Such works, Elkins pointed out, seem inevitably *limited*, in that they are directed at a particular market lying outside the mainstream; *uninteresting*, as they are no longer exemplary; *misinformed*, because they are the result of limited communication with the 'centre'; and *belated*, because they occur after a lag of time. But from the vantage point of today, we can perhaps more readily recognize that such blanket assessments often failed to take into account the differentials within the temporality of modernity as it impacted on and unfolded beyond the West. As the curator Ming Tiampo (2011; 4) suggests, while discussing the Japanese Gutai movement, a better model than the old 'center/periphery' binary is that of transnational "cultural mercantilism," by which Ming means that there was often a "a two-way exchange." Modern non-Western art is thereby re-constructed as a complex narrative of influence, absorption, succession and divergence. It occurs through emulation and the anxieties, even resentments, provoked by the influence of Western models, but also in relation to compelling local pressures and interests.

Elkins' discussion of historical Chinese landscape painting and the two responses to his book, provide an interesting context within which to see the essays by Jonathan Miles on the Chinese artist Hong Gang Xiong, the Chinese academic Feng Jie on the contemporary Chinese practitioner of calligraphy, Zhang Qiang, and by the Chinese philosopher and critic Xia Kejun. Miles' focuses on the role of the animated body in relation to the painting of Xiong, writing "Painting is a both propulsion and a gathering. It expands around its impulse to present what is in excess of this rhythm." Feng Jie connects the traditions of Chinese calligraphy, especially its relationship to Daoism, to the philosophy of deconstruction of Jacques Derrida, detouring Derridian notions of writing via an alternative cultural perspective. Xia Kejun begins his ambitiously speculative, manifesto-like essay, by asserting: "if Chinese contemporary art has

any contribution to make to the discourse on painting, it is to discover the *philosophical* dimension of the medium through producing a new kind of 'residual' image, or what I term the 'infra-image'."

The transhistorical and transcultural dialectics evident in the writings and work of the mainland Chinese contributors are also implicit in the essay by the Taiwanese artist Cheng-Chu Weng who discusses her own work in an essay provocatively entitled 'Making Minimalism Disappear'. Weng engages explicitly with a modern Western genre from the vantage-point of twenty-first century Taiwan, so as to shift the ground upon which the minimalist aesthetics of presence was established into one pervaded by absence. As she writes: "The tension with the past meaning of minimalism presents a haunting of certain forms and ways of seeing."

Widening the geographical frame, and exploring another instance of temporally extended dialogue, we include an essay by the British curator and critic Charles Merewether on the pioneering Pilipino artist Robert Chabet. Merewether discusses the impact of Russian Constructivism, especially the concept of *Faktura* and the work of Vladimir Tatlin, on the 'extended paintings' made forty years later by Chabet, during the 1980s, an indication of the potential for cross-cultural dialogue that involve spatio-temporal differentials that facilitate a re-visioning or re-directing of the potential of an earlier moment in art taking place in a very different cultural and geographical setting. While Chabet's work can be linked to the resurgence of painting through the 'postmodern turn' of this period in the West, as Merewether argues, "there was nothing in this body of work [Western painting] that rethought painting from the inside out, as Chabet had initiated with his plywood series."

Shifting from essays that consider dialogues from the perspective of non-Western art, the artist and art historian Simon Morley explores the Western 'Zen boom' of the 1950s and 1960s, focusing specifically on the relationship between Zen Buddhism and monochrome painting. For Western artists who expressed an interest in breaking out of the straightjacket of Western cultural models, Zen became an especially important focus of attention, and, as Morley writes, Zen-inspired artists "participated in a much broader paradigm shift within Western culture, one that involved a loose and ever-evolving body of thought, belief and action that amounted to a counter-cultural tendency of an inherently anti-institutional bent."

Morley argues that, while the interest of these Western artists in Zen amounted to a form of 'Orientalism', it was of a very different to the inherently oppressive imperialistic version anatomized most influentially by Edward Said (1978).

Within the creative trading of characteristic attitudes and styles that constitute the varied encounters and dialogues that have taken place between Western and non-Western painting over the past century, and which today are taking place within an increasingly 'shrinking' globalized culture, we often witness not the antinomy of East and/or West, but rather engagements by artists with complementary relationships in which an 'elsewhere' is productively encountered and engaged with. As further evidence of such creative interaction, we republish texts by the Korean artist Lee Ufan selected by Simon Morley, which are accompanied by a presentation of works on paper chosen by the artist. The specific cultural context for Lee's development as an artist is the dilemma posed by rapid modernisation and globalisation in East Asia. In 1960s and 1970s, when Lee was developing his thought and practice in Japan, several East Asian countries experienced their economic 'miracles' under the watchful eyes of the United States and its allies, and in overt opposition to Communism. But this modernisation project meant the rationalisation of these societies around narrowly instrumental, technology-centred, Westernised goals. Through his writing and art, Lee Ufan has sought the grounds from which to both assimilate and, more importantly, challenge this growing hegemony.

Lee's work, and the examples of other artists' works discussed in this issue of JCP show that the artist is a dynamic partner in acts of translation, often seeking roundabout ways to disinter buried possibilities and reopen understanding. The result is a fluid set of pictorial representations that are in pursuit of culturally specific goals and aspirations while also connecting to deep underlying contiguities, to the scattered traces of the common ground of human experience as it unfolds at the level of shared interactions between the body, the mind, the environment, and history. The interplay of internal and external forces within any artist, and the continual possibility of the emergence of new values, meanings and practices - even as dominant and residual cultural norms remain conditioning factors - constitute what Pierre Bourdieu (1977) calls the 'habitus' of the artist.

The dialogues in painting we present here take place on three broad levels: the level of individual growth, adaptation and action, the level of local cultural norms responding to the forces of change and producing recursive cultural patterns, and the level of the universal, which is grounded in the constants dictated by human biology or genetic constants. These universal givens of human existence, which are determined by the neurological and biological substrate, find expression within specific cultural forms and beliefs, solidify into recursive patterns of thought and behaviour, and are then subject to continuous modifications on individual and group levels under the pressures exerted from within a specific culture and from without. Individual development and change are always possible because no culture is an essential and eternal entity but rather is continuously evolving and overlapping within changing and unpredictable fields.

Over the past several decades transcultural dialogues have intensified within the multiple meeting-places characteristic of contemporary global culture. In the age of the Internet and cheap air travel, of international art fairs and biennials, the geographical, historical, and cultural problems flagged by Elkins which often made non-Western modern art seem limited, uninteresting, misinformed and belated are no longer such obstacles. But the leveling, homogenizing impact of neoliberalism has greatly diminished the possibilities of finding genuine 'elsewheres', and the de-territorializing of contemporary art all too readily leads to its de-humanizing. As Lee Ufan (2008, 172) writes:

The present age is a place where alien beings meet and part, a place where no collective illusions can be formed. It is almost impossible to create union between reason and the world. Because of this it is difficult for artists to make works that provide people with ideals by which they can mutually confirm their identities or concepts that lead to harmony with a complex environment. If one is not careful, artworks will merely reflect the egotism of a particular group or the taste of individuals, thus becoming enclosed places filled with stagnant air.

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