

## **Li Huayi, Past and Present**

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As an artist from a culture with a strong and unique artistic tradition who wishes to be respected on the stage of international contemporary art, Li Huayi faces a number of questions, contradictions, and conflicts. How can he be relevant (and marketable) within an international contemporary art movement which has its foundations in the West and yet work with techniques and subject matter that are unique to his own culture? How can he work with techniques and explore subjects that are based on a centuries old tradition that is foreign to the contemporary idiom and yet be considered contemporary? How can he live and be successful in the West and yet maintain a connection and identity with his native culture?

Li Huayi has been faced with these conflicts and contradictions his entire life. The grandson of a comprador to a major Swiss company, Li Huayi was born in Shanghai in 1948, the year the system of wealth and privilege his family had enjoyed came to an end. Over the following decades his father was relocated to Qinghai, the family fortune largely dispersed, and he himself came under regular scrutiny. However, he was able to remain in Shanghai and to pursue studies in art.

Li Huayi began to study painting in 1954 at the age of six with Wang Jimei, son of the famed artist and philanthropist Wang Zhen (Wang Yiting, 1867 - 1938). He displayed talent in the traditional 'big brush' styles of the Shanghai school and was considered somewhat of a child prodigy. His first artistic contradiction came in his teens when, tired of the limitations of the techniques he was studying and seeking new challenges, he sought out a new teacher. At age sixteen his intellectual curiosity led him to begin studies with Zhang Chongren, who was trained at the Royal Academy in Brussels. From him Li Huayi learned the basics of Western art theory and practice, albeit through the lens of a Chinese artist. He also studied the Soviet Realist styles that were beginning to dominate Chinese public art in the 1960s. While he sought out and studied these styles due to artistic and intellectual curiosity, the training served him in good stead during the Cultural Revolution which he survived as a member of a team of 'worker artists' producing large Social Realist works for public consumption in Shanghai.

The Cultural Revolution influenced Huayi's artistic pursuits in two profound ways. When this movement began in 1966 he was eighteen and art was only one of the career paths he was considering. When it ended in 1976 he was twenty-eight and his career path as an artist had been set. His

experiences during the Cultural Revolution also directed his artistic pursuits along unexpected paths. Many artists with similar training and experiences during the Cultural Revolution have continued to practice techniques and styles based on the Western traditions they were forced to learn. In contrast, Huayi found that after ten years of being forced to practice these techniques and styles for propaganda purposes he needed to explore other means of expression. Because Western style painting was used so much for propaganda purposes, he reacted against it and instead looked to traditional Chinese styles for sources of influence.

At the end of the Cultural Revolution, Li Huayi found himself again facing another conflict: art had become his avocation, yet for the majority of his career he had been trained in and practiced topics and techniques he found unacceptable. In the relative freedom of the years that followed the Cultural Revolution, he set about exploring new means of expression. In part he did this by traveling throughout China, seeking out famous scenic sites, particularly mountains such as Huangshan in Anhui province. He also developed an interest in Buddhism and ancient Buddhist art and made the very long and, at the time, difficult trip to Dunhuang where he studied Buddhist paintings in the ancient caves.

During the closing years of the Cultural Revolution, Huayi had also become a dedicated, if secret, scholar of the great Chinese ink painters of the preceding generation. Zhang Daqian, the great Chinese landscape painter, was the artist he came to admire most. Zhang had become something of a cultural hero in certain Shanghai circles during this period and has had a profound influence on Li Huayi's later career. He is the artist Li Huayi continues to measure himself against and, in many ways, to compete with. Zhang had also spent time in Dunhuang and had created a style based on his experiences there. In Dunhuang Huayi found a style that was authentic and Chinese – much of it over fifteen hundred years old. Combined with his fascination with Buddhism and Zhang Daqian, it was natural for him to develop a style based on his studies there. At first Buddhist topics were the subjects of his works in the Dunhuang style. While done with brush and paper, these works featured strong areas of opaque color which gave them an overall decorative appeal. Later he expanded his range of topics in this style to include horses and other secular themes.

Li Huayi soon realized that his works influenced by the paintings at Dunhuang were not his ultimate artistic statement. He came to consider them experiments, an artistic detour, but also an important opportunity to explore new artistic possibilities. He continues to use opaque colors and certain other techniques he learned during these experiments, but there is little other influence from this style in

his current paintings.

In 1982 Li Huayi and his wife took advantage of an opportunity to move to the United States and settled in San Francisco. He first made a living in food service at a major hotel but was soon discovered by Roberta English, a dealer specializing in contemporary art, who mounted an exhibition of his works. This proved to be commercially successful and allowed him to enter the Academy of Art in San Francisco where he completed his Master of Fine Arts degree in 1984.

Once again Huayi found himself facing conflicts between his fascination with the theory and practice of post-World War II painting in the United States, the post-modernist theories and approaches taught at the Academy of Art, and his background and training in China. Post-war American art attracted him intellectually and visually yet he found the actual practice of these styles unappealing due to the negative feelings he had developed about practicing Western art during the Cultural Revolution. His readings of post-modern theory and living in the United States heightened his desire to be 'contemporary' and increased his awareness of the complexities of that term. His own philosophy on being a contemporary artist reflects this background: "In my mind, being contemporary is not about being fashionable or doing the most current thing. It is not about doing installation art simply because it is the most avant-garde, or performance art because it has taken installation art's place as the most fashionable. The word 'contemporary' is very personal, your own feeling, but also relevant to your time and place".

Fortunately, his teachers at the Academy of Art were fully versed in post-modernist theory and encouraged him to develop his own style using Chinese materials and techniques. Through this philosophical background he came to see that his artistic challenge was not limited to linking the Chinese with the contemporary West, but rather linking ancient Chinese with the contemporary, both in China and in the West.

His first attempts to find these links, done while still a student at the Academy of Art, consisted of experiments with abstract forms in ink, at times combining painting with collage. His training and interests led him to focus on the abstract patterns traditionally found on borders of ceramics and other decorative arts over a background of spontaneously applied ink. Influence from Zhang Daqian is evident in Li Huayi's approach to the backgrounds of these works. One of Zhang's great innovations was the use of free and dynamically splashed ink to add spontaneity to his landscapes. Like Li Huayi, Zhang was influenced by his studies of Western art practice and theory; in his case the Abstract

Expressionists of the post-war period. Huayi incorporates the splash ink technique in his works of the early 1980s, though he goes much further than Zhang in creating works that are purely abstract.

During this time he had his first one-man exhibition at an American museum, the Pacific Asia Museum in Pasadena, which featured a combination of his Dunhuang-style paintings and his 'Abstract Expressionist' works. His abstract paintings in particular received critical acclaim from Michael Sullivan, a leading scholar of Chinese painting.

For the next ten years Li Huayi explored the potentials and limits of abstract painting combined with elements from early Chinese art. At the end of that time he came to feel that these explorations were technically and intellectually interesting but did not express his artistic soul or heritage. He also felt he had matured enough as an artist, both in terms of technique and personal identity, to create something new in the most important Chinese painting theme: landscape.

Li Huayi was well positioned to take on this artistic challenge: he had full mastery of several forms of painting using brush and ink and had developed other skills based on ancient Buddhist paintings from Dunhuang. Through his early studies with Zhang Chongren, his experience with Soviet Realist styles during the Cultural Revolution and his studies at the Art Academy, he was aware of and conversant with Western art theory and principles. His skills as an oil painter are such that he is able to produce convincing copies of masterpieces of the Italian Renaissance and has incorporated other Western techniques such as collage into his art. For a variety of reasons he chose to incorporate elements from but ultimately reject each of these genres as his final artistic statement. Very early on he had found the spontaneous styles of the Shanghai school to be overly simplistic. Though commercially successful he rejected his style based on Dunhuang paintings as lacking artistic challenge and meaning. He rejected Western techniques due to his experiences during the Cultural Revolution and his desire to find his own voice based on something uniquely Chinese. His training in post-modernist theory allowed him the freedom to seek his own unique artistic voice.

Li Huayi found inspiration in the monumental landscape tradition of the Northern Song dynasty (960 - 1126). In a true post-modern fashion, he made a conscious choice, not based on the limits of his abilities, but rather on an artistic, theoretical and philosophical foundation. First, he cites the pure visual appeal of these imposing landscapes. Guo Xi's *Early Spring*, a favorite of Li Huayi's, is one of the most complex and visually stunning Chinese paintings. Few artists practicing traditional Chinese painting techniques today have the patience or the ability to produce such large and yet finely detailed

paintings. He had first seen a Northern Song dynasty landscape in 1978 when he made a special visit to Beijing to view an exhibition. In 1989 he was able to go to Taiwan and view several of the great surviving masterpieces of Northern Song dynasty painting in the collection of the National Palace Museum, Taipei. Included were Fan Kuan's *Travelers amid Mountains and Streams*, Guo Xi's *Early Spring*, and Li Tang's *Whispering Wind among Pines on the Mountain*.

The monumental landscapes of the Northern Song also presented Li Huayi with a variety of artistic challenges. These works, large in scale and concept, and detailed and time-consuming in execution, have long been recognized as the pinnacle of Chinese landscape painting, and the few existing works are considered national treasures. This point was impressed upon Li Huayi by Zhang Chongren while Li was still in his teens. However, very few artists since the end of that dynasty have had the patience to practice the technique or the skill to capture their essence. Again Zhang Daqian is among the few exceptions, though his forays into this style often took the form of forgeries.

Li Huayi also was attracted to these styles and concepts because the Northern Song was so far in the past and so few actual works survive, that working in them is actually quite conceptual. His fascination with the artist Li Cheng (916 - 967) is an example. Li Cheng's traditional biography relates that he was from a family of Confucian scholars who lived in Yingqiu, Shandong province and was of 'noble character and had lofty aspirations'. This is followed by a description of the technical qualities of his landscape painting and a statement that critics considered him the greatest landscape painter of all time. Even at the time his biography was written, only a little more than a century after Li Cheng's death, very few paintings by the artist survived and there were many fakes. The biography closes with the famous line: 'In his whole life [the Northern Song painter and calligrapher] Mi Fu (1051 - 1107) saw only two that were authentic, promoting him to write *A Discussion of the Nonexistence of Li*'.

Attempting to capture a sense of an artist who was so deeply admired, yet whose works have been known only through descriptions and a few copies and forgeries for around one thousand years, is the type of artistic and intellectual challenge that fascinates Li Huayi. His pursuit of this artist has led him not only to read the available literature, but also to travel to Li Cheng's home town in modern Linzi, Qingzhou, Shandong. There he has studied the physical landscape, the pine trees, and the general environment. He has climbed in areas far from the normal paths in order to get some sense of what the place might have been like during Li Cheng's lifetime. In his works he attempts to capture not only the technical aspects of Li Cheng's painting style, but also, as much as possible in contemporary times, the essence of what Li Cheng would have seen and experienced.

Northern Song paintings appeal to Li Huayi for broader social and historical reasons as well. He sees in the turmoil of the period a parallel to contemporary times. Today we have an information revolution based on the internet; in the Northern Song printed books made possible the widespread dissemination of information through written materials. Today we are threatened by terrorism; the Northern Song was threatened by foreign invaders of all types. Today we question traditional values and ways of thought; the Northern Song rejected many aspects of Chinese culture as it had been practiced during the preceding Tang dynasty. Li Huayi empathizes with the Northern Song landscape painters and shares their desire to find refuge and solace in the wonders of monumental landscapes.

Li Huayi also finds that the monumental landscapes of the Northern Song are uniquely suited to the needs of a contemporary art audience. He states: "Today is not like ancient times in China; we are not sitting in a quiet studio looking at a small hand scroll. The literati tradition of creating small works for a few peers holds little interest for me. I feel a need to create something that is stately, that has impact – visual impact equal to that of works done by other contemporary artists. Viewers must be in awe of the painting. Therefore I paint in large formats – either the vertical hanging scroll traditional to Chinese landscape painting or the horizontal scroll.... Such a work requires energy and a seriously creative attitude. It is not just a gala; it is an entire opera. It has to be complete from the first note to the last. This sense of majesty, of monumentality, is what attracts me to Northern Song dynasty landscape painting".

In a true post-modernist fashion, Li Huayi finds the theoretical rationale for his works in a number of sources. He finds in Abstract Expressionism and in the works and writings of the 20th century Chinese master Zhang Daqian (himself undeniably influenced by Abstract Expressionism) the theoretical roots of the splashed-ink technique he employs to create the large-scale compositional elements of his landscapes. He also has sought and found a theoretical basis in much earlier Chinese writing. He can quote from memory a section of volume six of the *Huaji* (a Song dynasty publication) which contains a story about an artist named Chen Yongzhi who had particularly good technique. According to this entry, this artist did everything wonderfully – rocks, trees, everything and yet his paintings were not successful. They lacked interest, elegance, and spirit. A wise man named Song Fugu advised him: "Here is what you need to do. Find an old house with a leaky roof. Go to a wall where the water has run and created a stain. Place a thin, transparent piece of silk on the stain, and look at the stain through it. If in that stain you can see mountains and valleys, clouds and waterfalls, then you should trace the stain and use it as the composition for your painting. This practice will make your

paintings better because the stain is natural”.

His success has been more than commercial. In 1998, one of his works was selected for inclusion in *A Century in Crisis*, a major exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum, with a catalogue by Kuiyi Shen and Julia Andrews. His reputation is now international; he has had well-received exhibitions in Hong Kong and Shanghai as well as in New York and California.

Li Huayi has now been pursuing his monumental landscape style for nearly fifteen years. He continues to find new aspects to explore, new techniques to refine, new artistic challenges to overcome, and new content to add. Over the last few years he has made a number of pilgrimages to famous mountains in China. In addition to his exploration of Li Cheng's home territory in Shandong, he has climbed a newly opened area on Huangshan in Anhui, Lushan in Jiangxi, Wuyishan in Fujian, Zhangjiajie in Hunan, and Huashan in Shanxi. While these actual places are not the subject of his paintings, experiencing them and capturing something of their essence contributes to his creative process, Huayi also took advantage of a recent exhibition at the National Palace Museum in Taiwan to spend time with some of the great masterpieces of Northern Song landscape painting rarely shown in public.

Current exhibition:

The exhibition for which this catalogue is written provides insight into Li Huayi's current artistic pursuits. In the broadest sense, the entire exhibition can be seen as a single art work – an installation piece by the artist. He was given the challenge of creating twenty new pieces that would represent the full range of his artistic activities. He also sees the exhibition as presenting a series of challenges and opportunities for him to explore. First, it is his first solo exhibition in Europe and he wishes to show his full range of formats, concepts and themes, techniques, materials, and styles. Secondly, the gallery is internationally known for handling the highest quality Asian antiquities but has only recently begun to show contemporary works on paper. Therefore Li set himself the challenge of creating a small number of paintings that could be viewed as objects. Lastly, as with any gallery, the nature of the space presents certain challenges and opportunities which he has tried to exploit.

He has met his first challenge by creating works in a carefully planned range of compositions, sizes and formats. Nine of these paintings are quite small and in a shape usually associated with fans. Three, in fact, are mounted as fans and fill his self-imposed requirement that certain of his works can serve as 'objects'. He has also included ten paintings that are within his usual range of format and scale, and

one work that is exceptionally large. He explores different issues and concerns in each category and in each work.

### Large scale

The largest painting, *Cloud Mountains* serves as an example of both his intellectual and his working processes in creating a work of this monumental scale. The space in the gallery available for such a work is at some remove from the visitor. It is also horizontal, rather than vertical and quite large – eight feet long. Therefore, even before he had a piece of paper on which to paint, the artist had come to a number of critical decisions about the nature of the painting: the basic composition needs to be horizontal and very large; the forms need to be large and bold to hold the viewers attention at some distance; the brush strokes need to be dynamic with very strong contrasts in ink tonality.

The paper presented the first real challenge. Since Li Huayi finds that seams in the paper inhibit the ink from flowing freely when he is in the initial stages of creating the big blocks of the painting, he wanted a single sheet for this composition. Single pieces of paper this large are not commonly available so he had a paper dealer in Shanghai custom order two very special sheets of paper, each four by eight feet. This is not just any paper: the raw material from which it is made was aged for more than twenty years to reach just the right consistency. Once made, the paper was sent to Shanghai where it was treated with Chinese herbs and left to reach just the exact combination of absorbency and strength to provide the ideal material for Li's approach.

His next step is to prepare the broad compositional elements in his mind. Recreating an actual scene is not the point of Li's landscapes. This is true of Chinese landscape painting in general. They are more an expression of self with a focus on the play of brush and ink. The conceptual stage is therefore very important and certain issues need to be addressed, such as: will this landscape be of a particular season, will it be light and airy or dark and dense, and what elements should be included, and how should they be distributed?

Once he reaches decisions on these key issues, Li begins to paint. His painting needs are fairly simple: paper, a few brushes and ink. He can paint almost anywhere that is large enough to hold his works and has no distractions. Li Huayi is passionate about Western classical music and often has music playing while he paints. He first lays his paper on the floor and starts by pouring ink on it. He manipulates this ink with broad flat brushes or by lifting the edges of the paper.



Once (and if) he is satisfied with the effect of these broad areas of wash, he allows the work to dry and then mounts it on a stiff surface like gator board. This allows him to attach the work to an easel and paint vertically with the entire work visible at all times. This is in contrast with the traditional Chinese approach which is to lay the paper on a table and work in the horizontal. He uses an established vocabulary of brush strokes to build up the forms of his landscape: most of his rocks and trees and the 'wrinkles' are done in the curly strokes associated with Guo Xi (c. 1020 - 1090) while his 'axe-cut' strokes and small 'raindrop' strokes are associated with others, such as Li Tang (died 1130) and Fan Kuan (990 - 1030). His extensive study of these Song painters has enabled him to form, however, an entirely personal vocabulary.

Li Huayi often starts this phase of his large scale paintings by creating one group of trees. In *Cloud Mountains* these trees are on the cliff on the left. These trees are often done in detail and with tints of colors serve as an anchor for the remaining composition. They also add meaning to the work. Pine trees are among the most enduring images in Chinese painting and poetry. The depiction of pines has been a continuous tradition for at least three thousand years, the subject accumulating many layers of meaning and association – a noble character, strength under adversity and long life are only a few of these associations.

After the trees have been inserted, Li begins to add layers of texture and surface to his landscape forms using layers of ink applied with a fine brush. As with his other materials, he is very particular about his brushes, going to the extreme of creating his own design and having them custom made. On a large painting, this phase can take a very long time; the execution of this particular work required approximately three months. The challenge is to find a point when the work is 'complete'.

### Medium scale

A variety of compositional, technical and thematic issues are explored within the ten medium scale paintings in this exhibition. Three of the paintings are vertical in format: two of these are relatively small at about three feet, while one is well over four feet tall. The remaining seven paintings are horizontal in format and range from four to six feet in width. Two of the ten paintings, *Gorge in Clouds* and *Light through Clouds* can serve as a study in the impact of either a vertical or horizontal format.

In many ways, the paintings are similar. They both feature a central landscape mass in dark ink; these

are highlighted by much lighter areas of mostly untouched paper that seem to represent banks of mist and clouds. A single tree or a small group of trees occupies a key location on the central mountain in each work. Massive and indistinct mountain forms built up in jagged and curving strokes of light gray ink fill the background. Yet the overall effects of the two works are different. In *Gorge in Clouds* the energy flows from bottom to top as the viewer's eye is drawn through the painting by the curve of the bank of clouds. The flow of energy in *Light through Clouds* is blocked here and there by dark gullies and mountains. The result is a painting that feels more compressed, almost claustrophobic.

Two other works serve as examples of different approaches at the most fundamental level – the application of ink. *Dark Mountain with Russet Trees* is an example of what the artist calls his dark paintings. The series is the culmination of experiments begun in the late 1990s to push the limits of how darkly and densely the elements of a landscape can be applied and still render it readable. While largely conceptual, these works present very real technical challenges: the application of thick, dark layers of ink washes requires great control on the part of the artist and very specific types of paper and brushes. There is also the risk of the resulting work looking stiff and overworked – conceptually successful but visually a failure.

Li Huayi explores a very different set of technical and theoretical issues in works like *Peaks at Dusk*. Here he has employed the built-up-ink technique to create this landscape, resulting in a softer, more atmospheric image than possible using the splashed-ink technique. Building up ink requires a great deal of time and energy; every part of the surface of the painting has been touched and retouched with a small brush. Whereas the splashed-ink process needs a paper that absorbs the ink slowly, allowing it to spread and be manipulated, the built-up-ink process, on the other hand, needs a paper that instantly absorbs the ink, preserving the definition of the fine strokes. This type of paper is rare, and finding large pieces of it is difficult. Both the energy and the nature of the paper required to build up ink account for this painting's small scale.

#### Small format

Li Huayi has included nine small paintings in this exhibition, all in the fan format. Three are mounted as actual fans (*Trees and Waterfall*, *Trees on a Mountain Ledge*, and *Trees and Waterfalls in High Mountains*) with rigid frames and handles. The fan format is new for Li Huayi. Up until very recently all his paintings have been large, monumental in scale as well as concept. The fan provides him an opportunity to explore a whole series of new artistic issues raised by the specific formats, the actual materials and the new themes and content.

The rounded shape of the fan and its small scale present compositional issues that are very different than those presented by the artist's much larger paintings in either vertical or horizontal formats. In the Southern Song dynasty (1126 - 1279), the practice in such small format paintings was to place the painted elements on one side of the composition and leave the other side relatively untouched, to suggest space and allow a sense of openness. Li Huayi plays with this compositional device, sometimes placing most of his elements in the center, sometimes on either side.

The three small format works mounted as fans are painted on silk rather than paper. Silk differs from paper in the amount and type of resistance and feel in relation to the brush, in the speed and manner in which the ink is absorbed and in the ways in which it can be manipulated and handled. However, both they and the six fan-format paintings on paper share common ground and can be seen as experiments with the challenges and potentials presented by the format. Some feature multiple layers of heavy washes, others feature the built-up-ink technique discussed above. Some are relatively spare and detailed requiring fine precise brushwork, while others are densely painted and emphasize the contrasts in ink.

These small format paintings allowed the artist to play with topics outside of his normal vocabulary. The majority of Li Huayi's paintings contain no sign of human habitation and very little indication of time or season. This is both in keeping with the artist's desire to treat the landscape as an abstraction and also due to philosophical and personal concerns. A number of these fans, however, include all of these elements. One portrays the traditional theme of a fisherman on a remote lake, another of a mountain temple, a third a winter landscape and a fourth, a densely painted and very dark painting, a moonlit summer evening.

This exhibition provides the viewer opportunities to explore the work of a gifted artist who has come to his current vision through personal choice and a deep philosophical underpinning. It also poses the question: What is contemporary Chinese art? Is it limited to techniques and materials that are outside of those traditionally employed in China, or is it possible to make a contemporary statement built on a personal interpretation of ancient traditions?

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