

Representation & Reconstruction: Li Huayi's Recent Landscape

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Painters throughout China's history have, implicitly or explicitly, sought to define their own space within the art world or history of art as they knew it. In modern Western terms, we might describe this as the pursuit of innovation, and in traditional Chinese terms, as trying to become a master in one's own right (*zicheng yijia*). Seeking to stand out as unique among one's contemporaries, and to meet or surpass the standards of the great masters of one's own artistic tradition, are supreme challenges, and for ones that have focused the energies of artists in widely divergent social, economic, and political circumstances. Among contemporary Chinese painters working in traditional media, Li Huayi (b. 1948) stands out for his unique landscape painting.

Li Huayi was exposed to Chinese painting in his family collection in Shanghai, and as a child was introduced to the practice of Chinese painting by Wang Chuantao (*zi Jimei*, 1903-1976), the son of famous late Shanghai School painter Wang Zhen (*zi Yiting*, 1867-1938). Li Huayi later studied drawing and watercolor painting with Zhang Chongren (1907-1998), a devout Catholic who had graduated from the Royal Academy in Brussels in 1935 and was believed to be one of the best art teachers in Shanghai. In 1982, not long after the Cultural Revolution concluded, Li Huayi moved to California to study modern art at the San Francisco Art Academy. He received his degree in 1984, but over the course of the next decade, returned with vigor to the Chinese tradition. However, for a man of his generation, having lived his life entirely in post-1949 Shanghai and later in the United States, any links to the ancients are very much in his own mind and heart—they are spiritual and intellectual.

Despite the seeming modernity of his own aesthetic inheritance, he chose as models not the semi-abstract literati ink plays of the late Shanghai School, but instead the extremely representational but monumental masterpieces of early Northern Song Chinese landscape painting. He combines a strong sense of compositional drama, something that one might associate with abstract expressionism, with landscape images that evoke, but never copy, elements from the stunning masterpieces of Li Cheng (919-967), Fan Kuan (active 990-1030), and Guo Xi (after 1000-ca. 1090). Li Huayi's careful study of the classics of Chinese and Western painting, as well as the modern Western practice of abstraction, has yielded paintings that are at once firmly rooted in the history of Chinese art and instantaneously meaningful to contemporary viewers. The solid pine, the mist that both divides and unites the mountain peaks, the overhanging cliff, the tree clinging to rocky precipices, all echo the most potent motifs of Northern Song painting. At the same time, a viewer who has spent time in San Francisco, where Li Huayi now lives, will recognize with a start that the configurations of his

trees do not come from ancient painting, but are those of the windswept northern California coast. The dreamlike contrasts of pale mist and dark mountain cliffs resemble works of the seventeenth century artists of the fantastic, most notably Wu Bin and Gong Xian, who created bizarre images by injecting naturalistic effects of light or texture into completely impossible settings. The highly detailed constructions of trees and rocks in Li Huayi's paintings are remarkable because they are convincingly structured from individual elements that are in themselves conventionalized. Then, despite their seeming naturalism, they are placed in impossibly dangerous mountain settings. Clearly imaginary, they are so powerfully persuasive as to seem like the rare dream image that one encounters, with the shock of recognizing the impossible, in broad daylight.

The window of Li Huayi's studio overlooks the steep hills and valleys of coastal northern California. The air within is filled with Western classical music, and the walls are hung with full-scale reproductions and color photographs of paintings by Li Cheng, Guo Xi, and Fan Kuan. Li Huayi has a passion for the great masterpieces of Chinese painting and a love of the process of painting. Beyond this, he engages intensely with the art of the past through his own painting, taking an intellectual fascination with connoisseurship and appreciation much farther, into spiritual and psychological realms where pure reason will no longer apply. Although such enthusiasm was not unusual among literati painters of the Ming and Qing periods, and could still be found in the Republican period, it is extraordinary in the contemporary era. His work, so close to Song styles, at the same time reflects a modern cosmopolitan vision. He begins with a painting by laying out the composition in large geometric areas of wash, seeming to follow the procedures of Western watercolor painting. The worlds created in Li Huayi's painting are stable and peaceful. But the way he reaches this feeling is rather unique. He cuts the cosmic order into fragments, which he reconstructs in breathtakingly unexpected ways. One could argue that his work is postmodern, in that it deconstructs the preexisting structures of our world, and of the classical art to which it refers. Yet, the success of Li Huayi's work at unsettling or disturbing the viewer seems grounded in a conviction that our universe is indeed an orderly one, and that both artist and viewer share this knowledge; this order, so well understood and recreated by the great landscapists of the eleventh century, has in Li Huayi's work slipped only temporarily out of our grasp, like an interrupted dream.

Li Huayi's works move us by persuading us that he depicts essential qualities of the cosmos. Li Huayi suggests that he is in possession of the secrets of the universe, of which each painting gives us a fragmentary glimpse. His works may move us profoundly, but are not overly passionate. Their power lies in their possession of the qualities that are required of literati painting, that are informed by centuries of Chinese philosophy, and that stand outside time. As modern as they are antique, these paintings persuade us that they are part of a cosmic whole, and that they exemplify a universal

harmony whose absence from plain sight is an illusion.

For Li Huayi the spirituality of the painting is not sought in the process of making it but is inherent in the image itself. He writes that nature, as represented by Song artists, is not like the contemporary world that is sullied by industrial pollution. Its appeal to people, on the contrary, is like that of a Pure Land. If you try to understand the innocence and purity in the minds of the Song artists, you will find that they were untainted by the commercialism and free of the ostentatious and vulgar individuality of the present day. Li Huayi's aesthetic, psychological, and spiritual embrace of the Song masters is based upon this admiration. "To me," Li Huayi says, "being a contemporary artist means communicating your spirit, being responsible to the audience, and being true to yourself and your surroundings."

After years of successfully creating painted illusions in two-dimensional form, Li Huayi has turned his attention to making three-dimensional work as real objects in physical space. He first experimented for a brief period of time in a format developed a millennium ago, the accordion folded screen. The horizontal expanse of the surface presents new compositional possibilities, but perhaps more important, the screen itself serves the function of creating and dividing space. Screen painting thus opened up to the painter Li Huayi the potential of physical space in his art.

Placing his landscape hanging scroll in front of a compelling backdrop of large, mist-filled panels, rather like a figure posing against the trompe-l'oeil backdrop of an old Shanghai photo studio, he plays with multiple two-dimensional illusions to examine possible relationships between two and three dimensionality, physical space and its painted counterpart. His attempt to bring three-dimensional presentation, in the form of the installation, into ink painting, is one of many such efforts by contemporary Chinese artists to make ink art a part of the contemporary Chinese art world.

The viewer experiences Li Huayi's new work with his or her body, in the actual physical space it creates, but at the same time the spectator's eyes and heart are drawn to the compelling illusion of an even more vivid and spiritual painted space. We might paraphrase the words of the seventeenth century artist-theorist Dong Qichang and apply them to Li Huayi's landscape installations: "if one considers the wonders of brush and ink, real landscape can never equal painting."