

In Between Water, Fire, and Rock — **Postmodern Ink Art of Yuan Hui-Li**

Hsiao Chong-Ray

Yuan Hui-Li is representative of the third generation of artists in the development of Taiwan's postwar modern ink art, and is one of the few artists with a doctorate specializing in the research of contemporary ink theory. She received her doctoral degree in art creation and theory from the Tainan National University of the Arts with her dissertation "Thingness of Rocks: The Transition After Modern Ink Landscape Painting." She also became the first postgraduate to receive her doctorate with a specialized focus on ink art since the school was founded.

If the group of Chinese émigrés born in the 1930s who pioneered the modernist ink movement in 1960s Taiwan can be regarded as the first generation — with styles characterized by rendered ink wash, brushstroke, and calligraphy as exemplified by artist Liu Kuo-Sung, then the group of artists born in the 1940s and '50s that followed, can be considered the second generation. They broke away from the tenet of "abstraction above all" in the canon of ink painting, which they conflated with diversified shapes and forms, and evolving brushstroke styles, as represented by the work of Yuan Chin-Taa and Lee Cheng-Ming, among others. In this same vein, artists born in the 1960s, such as Yuan Hui-Li (also known as Yuan Shu; born in 1963) belong to the third generation who were the first group of artists to emerge from officially established university-level arts institutions that were set apart from the teacher-training college system.

A specialized art education background underpins the practice of this third generation of modern ink artists whose understanding of traditional ink painting, as well as their exploration and contemplation of contemporary creative approach, have been fundamentally reinforced. On a certain level, their knowledge of and reflection on what defines ink painting are more critical than that of the two generations that preceded them. At least, during their time, ink painting is no longer pigeonholed by the label of "Chinese painting," and the traditional or the modern evades the definition of what is abstract or nonabstract. One might even say that, in confronting the grand narrative of Chinese *shanshui* painting, or even the postwar modern abstract *shanshui* painting — the conception, reflection, and point of departure among this third generation of ink artists proves to be more holistic and systematic when compared to their predecessors.

As a member of the inaugural graduating class (1987) of the National Academy of Arts (now the National Taipei University of the Arts), Yuan's work *In Tune With the Heart of the Mountains No. 1* was selected for the *Innovations in Brush and Ink* exhibition at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum as early as 1992. This piece was also on view in her 2017 solo exhibition at the Tina Keng Gallery.

The year 1992 marks Yuan's departure from the legacy inherited during her student era: the traditional panoramic composition of *shanshui*. Under a principle of simplification, superfluous elements are removed to leave behind only mountains and boulders. A few mountains and rocks are set starkly against a plain white canvas: the scale and the spatial relationship between them completely collapse. The texturizing method that originally delineates the surface of mountains and rocks has also been simplified. The thickness present in the boulders is entirely flattened. Ever since, mountain/rock/object/character has become an important subject that Yuan contemplates and investigates, subsequently serving as the topic explored in her doctoral dissertation.

In addition to contemplating the subject of mountain/rock, her exploration of a new narrative in ink art first initiated in 1992 is notable in its probe into media and techniques pertaining to object/character. From *In Tune With the Heart of the Mountains* to the *Dwell Amidst the Mountain and Inhale From the Valley* series that began in 1998, until the *Discrete Islands* series initiated in 2009 and continuing through 2017 — Yuan has unveiled a variety of visual effects for mountain/rock/object/character in ink. Through her techniques in the application of ink, color, in collage, or through installation on a variety of media, including raw rice paper, smooth rice paper, silk, and linen cotton, the spirit of formalism is realized through her explorations of media and experiments with techniques. And “form is content” is a fundamental proposition in modern art.

Nothing short of miraculous, the ink revolution was an important achievement that followed the rise of the mountain-woods philosophy in the Wei and Jin dynasties. Chinese artists used fire to turn wood into charcoal, and then ground the charcoal into powder to mix with glue, which they shaped into ink sticks. In order to paint, they moistened the stick to grind it into ink, then dipped the brush in ink — leaving traces while creating a subtle dialog between the brush, ink, and paper (or silk). Artists not only set their intention with the brush, but produce meaning beyond the brush. Ink is rendered according to chance, without preconceptions; nature and humanity become as one. This is the sublime state of spirituality for the literati during the agricultural era. Yuan continues in this beautiful tradition by ceaselessly contemplating and transcending in her exploration of mountain/rock/object/character.

While attending an academic conference for painting and calligraphy in Beijing in the winter of 2015, Yuan was stunned when she experienced a red alert for smog for the first time. She suddenly realized that the beautiful, inhabitable scenery depicted in traditional ink painting has long vanished, and what she faces now is an overheated environment under the threat of global warming. As a contemporary artist who has been devoted to interrogating the traditions of ink art, how can she confront this situation with authenticity? And so, she proposed a “fiery ink” performance and installation work for the exchange exhibition, based on *Early Spring* by Northern Song artist Guo Xi. She uses the charred ashes of burnt rice paper to reproduce what had originally been an idyllic and moist classical *shanshui* painting. The ritualistic on-site performance, coupled with a ceremonial installation approach, paints a bleak picture where a contemporary artist sighs in lamentation amidst ashes of the grand

vistas of classical ink painting, rendered helpless in the collision of traditional *shanshui* and today's climate change.

Moist and Burnt: As Ink Breathes, Yuan's July 2017 exhibition at the Tina Keng Gallery, was a dialectic of fiery ink and traditional ink. Informed by her formal academic background and an instinct for salient critique, Yuan is able to move between the classical and the modern, to navigate the ebb and flow of fog/smog, as well as the aesthetics of moist/burnt, as she opens a new window into contemporary Asian art in the contrasts between and reflections of traditional ink and fiery ink.

In *Hidden Emotion in Texture*, another solo exhibition that took place at the Tina Keng Gallery in March 2021, *Manual of Yuan's Texturizing Strokes* and *THEY Shanshui Small Screens* stood prominently as two primary and compelling series of works. Just as the artist wrote in her artist statement, "This exhibition had been a decade in the making. I feel a sense of long overdue relief now that it's finally finished."

Perhaps another way to look at it is that the approach of fiery ink instantiates a professional artist's scrutiny of and response to the state of the world and to art history, while her traditional ink practice allows her to trace the vicissitudes of her life in her arduous journey to rebirth.

Manual of Yuan's Texturizing Strokes was on view as pages from enlarged ancient handbooks, with two styles illustrated on a single page: The Teardrop Stroke and the Hole-of-Tears Stroke, the Tangled-Heart Stroke and the Fretful Stroke, the Fiery Stroke and the Chop-Brush Stroke, the Chaos Stroke and the Heart-Rhythm Stroke, the Sorrowful Stroke and the Calm Heart Stroke, the Void-Spot Stroke and the Leaves-Shadow Stroke, the Nagging Stroke and the Wrinkles Stroke, the Thorny Stroke and the Nail Tip Stroke, the Stuttering Stroke and the Soft Brush Stroke, the Flowing-Light Stroke and the Flowing-Water Stroke, the Light-Sigh Stroke and the Remnant-Froth Stroke, the Dancing-Brush Stroke and the Silent-Thread Stroke, the Color Void Stroke and the Empty Stroke, among others. Each of the 32 styles comes with an inscription, such as the Tangled-Heart Stroke: "The modest lady wrestles with clumps of hemp / Tangled like her turbulent feelings / Alone in her melancholy / She cannot put it into words." Or the Chaos Stroke: "Feelings in disarray / Hair left uncombed / A mind burdened with sorrow." Or the Nagging Stroke: "Nagging and pestering / Muttering and murmuring / The woman finds herself old and weary." Or the Flowing-Light Stroke: "Sparse shadows flow / A gentle breeze quivers / A drag and a push / Time thus emerges." These titles, inscriptions, and texturizing styles entwine as undercurrents permeating form and meaning in Yuan's brushwork, and are ultimately orchestrated into a stirring song of the artist's life.

There was a script used exclusively among women in ancient China, called Nūshu, which allowed women to exchange clandestine knowledge, feelings, and opinions within the confines of the authoritarian, patriarchal society. No intention to hide is to be found in *Manual of Yuan's Texturizing Strokes*; instead, Yuan audaciously

divulges personal affection, frustration, loneliness, and her emotional maelstrom as a woman, limned earnestly as a permanent manifesto. It tells the profound love of a woman, embodied in texturized lines and dots that coalesce into lingering traces of the heart. Much like what the artist writes in the afterword of the Manual:

Time etches textures onto rocks,
But rocks contain sorrow,
with solitude and waiting as companion.
In love with blooms that tumble onto its body,
the rock provides sanctuary for the flower,
and the flower adorns the rock.

Devoted and inseparable
until the wind carries away the flower.
The rock longs an arduous longing
Regrets an arduous regret
And so resigns itself
to cleave traces of the passing days in lonely textures.

Texturizing attests to memories etched on the mind, to remnants of years past, and to vestiges of history. To analyze herself, to narrate her life's story through the juxtaposition of image (illustrations) and text (inscriptions) becomes a form of catharsis, where she faces herself again in an act of rebirth. Emulating the form of an ancient painting manual, *Manual of Yuan's Texturizing Strokes* documents the vicissitudes of her life, while pondering the truths of love. Just as what the artist writes in the afterword of the Manual:

Human lives are ephemeral; while rocks are eternal.
Painted rocks contain the infinite within the finite
and reflect the fleeting within the eternal;
these rocks become a snapshot of a moment.
Emotionless object
perhaps transforms for a temporary moment
into a vessel for memories.

Manual of Yuan's Texturizing Strokes was inspired by the *Ambiguous World* series, which began in 2007. It was a year when the artist was faced with tremendous turmoil in her life, and exploring texturizing styles and brushstrokes became a salve to her aching heart. She then spent almost seven years completing her doctoral dissertation "Thingness of Rocks" of almost 400 pages to investigate the "transition after modern ink landscape painting." The debut of her Manual reveals an immense power of sensibility behind the artist's rigorous intellect that welters with yearning for emancipation.

Though mountains and rocks are insensate, the artist breathes life into them through her paintbrush, and watches these mountains and rocks transmute into sentient beings as her art — as well as her love — finds a perpetual abode in their existence, dwelling in each texturizing stroke, hence a constant state of hidden emotion in texture.

In Yuan Hui-Li's contemplation of traditional ink, fiery ink, mountain and rock, character and object, tradition no longer hinders modernity. Instead, the former has become an important re-starting point for the latter. The artist's ink painting practice has thereupon entered the realm of post-modernity.

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