

Residual Charms
Fiery ink and moistened ink in the art of Yuan Hui-Li

by Xia Kejun

Brush and ink is the artistry of nature. The intrinsic characteristics of brush and ink may be based in moisture, but its enigma is in its amalgamation of nature and nothingness, hence, the medium of brush and ink is a “non-material materiality.” The tension of brush and ink depends, on the one hand, in its naturalized character; and on the other hand, in its mutable naturalness. Herein is the paradox and receptiveness of brush and ink. The creative transformation of brush and ink depends on a depth of experience with this paradox. The contemporaneity of brush and ink therefore hinges on strengthening this heterogeneity and variability in order to alter the logical contradictions of water and fire.

Modern life experiences are inseparable from the anxieties and apprehensions of individual existence. How can brush and ink embody the textures of modern life beyond the muted detachments of tradition? This entails a thorough shift in existing contemplative modes and sensory methods of brush and ink; hence, by injecting the incongruous element of fire! The prominence of media and textures is at the foundation of contemporary art. For brush and ink, a shift toward the contemporary is achieved by independent transformations from its characteristics of water, paper, ink, and readability, etc., that escape the limitation of preexisting schemas and stylizations! This requires a fresh contemplation of a new duality and pluralism; no longer the traditional binary of yin and yang, but the binary of fire and water, as well as a thorough materiality of residue.

Like a number of artists in mainland China, such as Wang Tiende who uses incense to burn vellum into the overlapping silhouetted forms of *shanshui* paintings; or the charred uneven remnants of white paper columns by conceptual artist Qin Chong; artist Yuan Hui-Li consciously began contemplating and conveying duality and residue with the reception of fire by water. Fieriness is not spoken of in tradition terms, which in fact requires a reduction of the fiery as in removing the “home fires” to achieve a texture that is as smooth as jade; contemporary brush and ink paintings require stoking the fieriness! In Yuan Hui-Li’s own words, allowing moisture to receive fieriness is a second breath for brush and ink.

Using the duality of “moist” and “burnt” characteristics of brush and ink – a duality not limited to the inked brush but also in the living material texture -- Yuan Hui-Li begins to transform the character of brush and ink and moves into the depths of “the residue of materiality”. Not only through fire, but by using remnant ashes to confront the classical,

enabling an appreciation of the potential in implications, and potential for this culture and this life, to “rise again from the embers.”

Yuan Hui-Li’s most recent series of work applying the duality of water and fire began with her experiences in mainland China. During an academic exchange in Beijing two years ago, the heavy haze of Beijing’s smog made a deep impression which compelled the artist to respond artistically to the contemporary catastrophe. Hui-Li began by burning *xuan* paper, then by using the charred paper as a brush to paint traditional *shanshui* paintings resulting in paintings using her unique “fiery ink” concept.

Of course, this also comes from her longstanding contemplations on the condition and conundrum of the *shanshui* painting in our time. Her previous *shanshui* paintings depicted a variety of beautiful stones using techniques of collage and subdued colors. Rootless and carefree, the leisurely floating rocks with speckles of overlaid colors are both understated and gorgeous. This also corresponds to the artist’s state of life and sense of survival at the time. The rocks are the incarnation of the transformation of Chinese culture. Rocks are like people, and people are like rocks. From 1992 to 1998, Hui-Li created mountainous forms by collaging *xuan* paper; she highlighted the characteristics of paper, whether raw *xuan* or ripe *xuan*, and later experimenting with silks and fabric materials. She also began painting the *Discrete Islands* series. These were her paintings of rock formations on the seas; specifically, the lone rocks on the seas near her studio. Looking out at the sea from the mountain top, she painted an expanse of heaven and earth. From one characteristic of water, she has now arrived at the other extreme characteristic of fire, and by using its residue to paint is almost an act of resurgence. Everything is transformed in confronting fire.

Of course, prior to this Hui-Li had already painted a number of fiery *shanshui* paintings using the bamboo brush. With her entire canvas constructed from trails of burning flames, the paintings became mountains in flames, and an atmosphere of burning lingers over the painting to reveal the fiery nature of brush and ink in full profusion, giving birth to the “fiery ink” series. But in Hui-Li’s view, she wished to further experience the spirit of fire: fire as a self-incineration through which the self vanishes and enters into a state of residue. Life that was life becomes such residue; therefore texture must be more thoroughly transformed. It was at this moment that she had an epiphany to use the residue from the burning to paint, which led to a complete transformation in painting, and the emergence of “fiery ink.”

“Fiery ink” represents a multifaceted breakthrough: first, in the thoroughness of materiality, *xuan* paper comes from paper, and its transformation by fire enters into a deep materiality; lampblack ink also originates in fire that has been returned to the natural

state of the material itself. This too is a materiality and sensory correspondence, with an internal accuracy. In the context of art history, this represents a return to the origins of painting in the Southern Song, a return to Mi Youren's works such as *Clouds Rising at the Xiao and Xiang Rivers*, etc., but with a smoky character that is more contemporary in nature, relevant to the air pollution created by contemporary industry. Hence, a contemporary issue is truly revealed: what constitutes redemption for the destruction of nature?

Yuan Hui-Li's "fiery ink" begins with burning. Rolled paper is burned into char, and these ash brushes are used to paint a classical *shanshui* landscape. This is also a type of performance art. The work itself has a strong sense of dialogue: on the one hand, it is an emulation of a classical *shanshui* painting, and on the other hand, it is an image painted in response using the residual ash of burned *xuan* paper. Additionally, rolls of burnt *xuan* paper are placed beside the paintings, retaining an atmosphere of books and scrolls, but exposing its charred tips. These three parts have been placed in a circular configuration, circular like Beijing's Temple of Heaven, giving the work as a whole an air of ritualistic ceremony! Of course, this is an individual rite of the contemporary life: a reverence for the remnants of objects, and an homage and review of the classical world. This method of presentation enables viewers to experience the intrinsic solemnity of brush and ink; but this is also a solemnity that has experienced the "fiery ritual" of modernity. It is praise that cannot be extinguished by contemporary life! We can see a fire halo on the edges of the rolls of paper, as though these residual lives are still leaping and breathing. Brush and ink paintings are no longer a single work, but a return to an arena of sacred and solemn ritual spirit!

Hui-Li's "fiery ink" is an excellent amalgamation of her conceptual nature with her characteristic painting. On the one hand, burning *xuan* paper and using the residual ash to paint is a tactile painterly sense, painted using ash brushes made of paper. This sort of painting has its own technical difficulties. Ostensibly an emulation painting, with changes to the traditional methods of emulation to achieve a distinctive brushstroke and imagery that fully reveals the incomplete and residual nature of brushwork and form. This actually expresses a different temporality, as though time itself has been seared into the painting, while also expressing the corporeality of the brushstroke. On the other hand, this is another path of return to the lineage of "charred ink" that rewrites the Chinese modernist monochromatic painting. From Huang Binhong to Zhang Ding, the charred ink tradition expresses the modern Chinese sense of burnout and distressed consciousness as well as an extreme expression of modern monochrome and living corporeality. Yuan Hui-Li's residual charred ink of using the char of paper ash to paint seems to be a return to the beginnings of painting, a return to the most primitive sketching, a return to the earliest tactile sense.

Yuan Hui-Li's works of "fiery ink" have a richness and depth of reflection and are a departure from the treatment of "fieriness" by artists preceding her. Firstly, there is a return to the act of writing: through the burning of paper scrolls, using the resulting ashes as media and fingers as brush, painting is rewritten. Secondly, the presence of corporality is achieved through a handmade paper brush and the fingers: A correspondence to imagery from classical paintings is present, yet the non-traditional brushstrokes hint at the risk of being drawn into a backdraft, representing a direct reaction to contemporary catastrophes. Thirdly, the juxtaposition of fragmented traces of catastrophe with ancient classical imagery: the literary air of classical paintings and the ancient literati are mutated through crisis to become a paradoxical coalescence of the fragmentary with the classical. This is a reflection of contemporaneity. Fiery ink and its fragments and embers are bestowed ceremonial dignity within the exhibition space; and the essence of the fragments is revealed in a halo. The incompleteness and fragmentary nature of fiery ink has regained the dignity and ceremony of painting, and has woken our deep reflections on the natural climate and atmosphere. Fourthly, the contemporary significance of the embers of time: after the work is completed, the embers of the charred traces continue to dissipate and to draw breath, forming a lingering reminiscence. These are the boundless excesses of remnants -- a salvation constructed by nature's destruction. This is the redemptive power of the contemporary aesthetic.

The contrast between the two paintings of the classical original and the carbon emulation are no longer a juxtaposition of a sketch and the representation, but a spiritual correspondence. It is a "correspondence of non-correspondence", a contrast of the fiery with moisture, a contrast of "remnant" to "completion." From this, Yuan Hui-Li's paintings have constructed a new aesthetic: an aesthetic of fiery motion and fiery vigor, an aesthetic of object remnants regaining dignity. This is a new charred ink, completely devoid of water; it is a reconstruction of brush and ink painting after its own exhaustion.

Allowing object remnants; allowing nature-destroyed, the residue of nature that has been burnt, to gain another existence, to gain dignity -- this is a truly contemporary aesthetic.