

Brushing Harmony: The Alluring Syncretism Between Man and Nature

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One of the oldest forms of paintings, known as Shan Shui, has its roots in China dating back to the 5th century. Derived from the Taoist philosophy that leans towards nature, Shan Shui usually centres around the landscape of mountains as the highest and therefore most sacred and honoured places in China. Chen Wei Meng, a contemporary Malaysian painter of Chinese descent, looks into his motherland's tradition through a new lens. Through his recent works, he explores implications of old Chinese ink techniques in abstract forms that take inspiration from nature.

It is believed that Shan Shui painters do not seek to imitate nature based on what they have witnessed, but rather attempt to address its connectedness to human beings. The wisdom evoked by the paintings – harmony, balance, amongst others – are principles that underlie human's life. The dynamic gestures performed by Shan Shui painters to attain the landscapes also define the essence of the paintings. Wei Meng upholds this principle when developing his recent series of monochromatic paintings '*Musang's Words*' (2019-2020) and '*SMS to Song*' (2022-2023). In these bodies of work, bold strokes executed with a certain force evoke strength, while subtler lines resulted by gentler movements illustrate serenity. Existing harmoniously on the surface of a delicate Xuan paper, these contrasting natures represent the "Yin and Yang" (equilibrium) in the flow of "Qi" (energy).

As a young man in the 1970s, Wei Meng was exposed to the boom of television pop culture filled with Hong Kong-American films. A quote from his all-time favourite martial art star Bruce Lee has always stayed true in his heart and resurfaced throughout the process of making these two recent series. "*Be water, my friend,*" Lee said. Indeed, water is a suitable metaphor for how Wei Meng views the act of painting; a gesture of constantly flowing and adapting to space. Interestingly, Wei Meng's affinity with this element has been established since his early stages of life. Back in his hometown Dungun, located in the East Coast of Malaysia, the waves of the sea were his daily muse. They later became the main focus of his paintings in his third solo exhibition '*Silent Monsoon*' (2012). Sitting at the beach, he was fascinated by the dynamic orchestra between the sea and the ever-changing weather and environment that surrounds it.

Despite the consistency of depicting various natural landscapes that have moved him – mostly encountered and experienced during his solo travels – evolution has been a vital aspect to Wei Meng's artistic journey. Since childhood, art quickly became Wei Meng's passion. Upon receiving an academic training in painting, Wei Meng has spent over three decades as a professional painter. After various explorations that mostly had centred around realism, it was in the early 2000s that he started travelling to unbeaten tracks to paint landscapes. Combined with a twist of contemporaneity such as adopting a panoramic angle, he established a signature style appreciated amongst art critics and collectors in the region. One might even attach the term "hyperrealistic" to these paintings, considering the meticulous manner in which he imitated the details – from the water ripples in '*Silent Monsoon*' to the rice plants in '*Sekinchan: Land of Fertility*' (2016). Moving from one series to another, a certain progression always appears – be it a twist in the hue or the position of the viewer in relation to the landscape.

In 2019, an artistic experimentation using Chinese ink and Xuan paper has produced a significant leap for the artist. As Wei Meng observed, "*My works have moved on to a new stage. Instead of depicting landscapes in a clear and defined manner, I sought to capture the mysterious shapes that result from the flow of my subconscious when painting these landscapes.*" (personal communication, 28 March 2023). Wei Meng also added that this change in technique was more of an intuitive decision rather than a result of a careful consideration.

Leaning towards the same visual and technique direction as *'Musang's Words'*, *'SMS to Song'* serves as an extension of the artist's renewed relationship with landscapes. The title of this solo exhibition at Wei-Ling Gallery is an acronym for "Shan Met Shui to Song Dynasty". On one hand, this underlines the main subject matters of the paintings – mountain and water – and the meaning of their coexistence. In real-life landscapes and within Wei Meng's paintings, these separate entities can be seen as one, blending together harmoniously without conflict. Through the artworks, the artist ponders upon the teaching and natural tendency of all living things to thrive without harming each other – their paths running parallel without necessarily having to oppose each other.

Within each vertical-oriented painting in *'SMS to Song'*, we may observe a combination of bold and thin lines forming an arch oriented in an upright position and creating a sense of enormity. Beneath this depiction of a mountain is a lighter and muted body of visuals that conveys something fluid and flowing. Here, the body of water is depicted without contour lines, but rather through the use of real water as a medium when painting – giving it a sense of existence. The artist's accidental discovery of this method has successfully captured the essence of water in the works. Below this experimental effect is a form that is almost symmetrical to the above arch, oriented upside down, as if evoking the idea of reflection or mirage.

On the other hand, *'SMS to Song'* also highlights the artist's attempt to relive the painting style originated from the Song dynasty of China. The powerful dynasty ruled China for over three centuries from 960-1279, and is known to have produced some skillful landscape painters. *Come closer and you can see* (2023) stands out in this series as a triptych work which references three representative landscape paintings from the Song dynasty: "Fan Kuan's *Travelers Among Mountains and Streams* (ca. 1000), Guo Xi's *Early Spring* (1072), and Li Tang's *Wind in the Pines Among a Myriad Valleys* (1124)"¹. These monumental landscape paintings were important to the Song dynasty particularly for the way they captured the painters' personal voices and worldviews. Wei Meng appreciates the unconventional angles, multiple focus points, and personal touch of these masters. They freed themselves from formal constraints, resulting in deeply personal and expressive works.

The phenomenon also reminds Wei Meng of a quote from the Chinese film director and actor King Hu, stating that while Western art "imitates" nature, Chinese art "experiences" nature – expressing what is in the painter's heart through painting. The title that was chosen for the triptych, "Come closer and you can see", reflects the artist's personal journey of understanding the spiritual meaning of landscape painting, which has taken time and experience for him to fully appreciate.

On a personal level, the artist's transitioning from hyperrealistic to Shan Shui-inspired abstract styles has served as a poignant reminder of the diverse paths that his artistic endeavour has taken. Traversing across different periods – drawing inspiration from the Song dynasty and interpreting landscapes through contemporary forms – Wei Meng exemplifies how artistic exploration knows no boundaries. His recent artistic endeavour has further underscored the endless possibilities that may be resulted from the confluence between traditional and contemporary elements, breaking down preconceptions and separations between them.

Rooted in the rich tradition of Shan Shui philosophy, Wei Meng's recent paintings have also served as a powerful testament to the invaluable lessons that nature can convey to humanity. *'SMS to Song'* eloquently captures the connection between man's life and nature through a minimalist yet skillful technique using Chinese ink – reminding us of the profound teachings that can be gleaned from the natural world. Through his intuitive and evocative brushwork, Wei Meng also emphasises the status of painters as interpreters, as they take the role of amplifying nature's wisdom through their artistic viewpoints. All in all, this series is a poignant

¹ National Palace Museum (ed.), "An Introduction to Landscapes of Northern Song," *Google Arts and Culture*.

reminder of the enduring wisdom and inspiration that nature offers to mankind, and the vital role of artists in illuminating them.

Chen Wei Meng's solo exhibition '*SMS to Song*' is on view from 25th April - 27th May 2023 at Wei-Ling Gallery, Kuala Lumpur.

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