

The Unbinding of the Self

by Prissie Ong

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"Its greatness is vast and boundless; it is the single substance of all sentient life, equally embracing the myriad things. It responds, giving rise to a thousand transformations; it changes, producing a multitude of manifestations. It neither comes forth nor passes away, yet it functions without pause. There is mind but no form, functioning but no human agency. It manifests as birth, yet there is no birth; it manifests as a body, yet there is no body. Always reckoning but never reckoned, always perceiving but never perceived, there is action without intention, and attainment without anything attained."

— *Baozang lun (Treasure Store Treatise)*

Unbounded. What does that word mean to you? Merriam defines it as having no limits, as being unrestrained and uncontrolled. But that is not the case for Chen Wei Meng's works for his eighth solo exhibition, titled *Unbounded*. To him these works are "unbounded" because they are free from conventional expectations of what ancient Chinese ink paintings are often perceived as. A departure from the well-known imagery by old Chinese masters from the Song dynasty that he studied vigorously and which can be seen in his previous solos. These works are not to disrespect those masters but to show growth and change. His works may look radical and akin to a dismantling of tradition, but in actuality, they remain true to the quintessence of *shan shui* (mountain-water). He still retains the core of Chinese ink wash paintings which are the brushworks, tonal variation, and the capturing of the "spirit" over realistic imitation. Letting these principles guide him in the making of his works without letting it constrain him.

To put it simply, the concept of "unbounded" is: "nothing is actually that important."

— *Chen Wei Meng*

In order to fully appreciate Chen's works, one has to see the man. The artist behind the paintings. Artworks are often self-explanatory, which are what some artists aim to achieve, but Chen's works come alive when you understand the philosophy that drives his artistic practice. As mentioned earlier, Chen has spent years studying traditional Chinese ink wash painters, namely the three greats: Fan Kuan, Guo Xi, and Li Tang. The art of *shan shui* that Chen draws from is strongly tied to his practice as a Taoist. Central to his practice of Taoism is the idea of being like water (*wu wei*), being aligned and attuned with the natural flow of things, to be guided by instinct. Chen's works are breathtaking when taken in from afar. And going closer, gives the paintings more meaning and it is from that

distance that his mastery over the medium really shines. Every movement, pressure of the brush, and rhythm is evident. The brush is an extension of him.

The fluidity can be seen in his Chinese ink brushstrokes. They go with the flow and each line that flows on the canvas is intentional. They show restraint and control. They are purposeful and yet, they still have that indescribable freedom that embodies the feeling of soaring. The cohesiveness of the imagery that epitomises a sort of defiance against gravity. Perhaps this is why his works feel so alive. It may not be immediately apparent; however, swirling forms of clouds, water, or atmospheric currents feels almost palpable when one is really immersed in the piece. Facing Chen's paintings are to encounter a dynamic field of energy where ink and pigment are in motion.

Pigment is mentioned here due to the fact that the acrylic stated as the medium on Chen's artwork descriptions aren't just ordinary readymade acrylic paint bought from a store. His artistic mastery is not only limited to his technical control; it is also in the mediums he uses. The paint he uses on all his works are self-made by obtaining the colour pigments and mixing it into a usable paste. Which is why his colours are unique. Every shade and hue cannot be replicated from using industrial made acrylics.

It is always the simplest things that are the hardest to do.

In this way, *Unbounded* also challenges the notion of artistic mastery as a display of technical control. The apparent simplicity of his compositions can be misleading for beneath it lies years of rigorous study and refinement. His ability to "let go" is not the absence of discipline but a culmination of it because it is precisely through internalising the principles of traditional ink wash painting deeply that he is able to move beyond them with such fluidity. Every line made on the canvas has to be perfectly in tune with each other or else it will ruin the cohesiveness of the entire composition. Chen achieves this by being still with One's Self, drawing in again from Taoism, where going with the flow is the ultimate source of serenity. Hence, the sense of peacefulness that washes over when viewing his work, calming the heart and mind; drowning out the noise of the world.

Fundamentally, *Unbounded* does not place emphasis on the breaking of rules or about transcending the need for them altogether. Rather, it is a testament to what happens when an artist relinquishes the desire for control and allows the work to unfold on its own terms, therefore the title *Unbounded*. In doing so, Chen not only redefines his own practice, but also asks one to reconsider their relationship with art—and perhaps, by extension, with life itself.