

**MIXING WATER AND OIL:  
UNDERSTANDING SHIMO  
IN THE CONTEMPORARY GLOBAL ART MARKET**

Ink painting (or water-ink painting, *shuimo hua* 水墨畫) has often been discussed as an “essential Chinese” painting mode. It has, after all, been practiced continuously in China for over 2000 years. Painting with oils is newer to China, but nonetheless many Chinese artists of at least the last hundred years have worked rigorously in oils as well as in ink.

One of the intriguing aspects of contemporary artists around the world is that, in fact, they move back and forth between the “traditional” media of their home cultures and different modes more recently introduced according to the message they need to communicate. One such artist is Shimo 石墨, a painter highly trained in the conventions of water-ink on paper, as well as ink and acrylic on paper, acrylic and diluted oil on paper, and oil on canvas. He is an artist whose recent production bears inspection for what it tells us about him, about Chinese art today, and its positioning in the global art market.

Shimo 石墨, born Cheng Yiwei 程彝緯 in Shanghai on May 28, 1962, received his BA from the China People’s Liberation Army Arts Academy (Beijing) in 1983, and his MA from the Shanghai University Art Institute (*Shanghai daxue meishu xueyuan*) in 2003. He has studied with Jiangsu artist Liu Kansheng 劉侃生 (b.

1910, a disciple of Shanghai master Zhang Daqian 張大千, 1899-1983), and the celebrated artist Zhang Dazhuang 張大壯 (1903-1980), a faculty member at the Shanghai Chinese Painting Academy.<sup>1</sup> Since 2003, he has resided in Sacramento, California.

Over the years, Shimo has held numerous positions in the art community in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. These include memberships in the Chinese National Artists Association and the Shanghai Calligraphy and Painting Institute, and service as President of the Shanghai Modern Art Institute, Vice Chairman of the Shenzhen Art Research Society, board member of the New Hong Kong People's Club, and Honorable Chairman of the Hong Kong China Research Institute.

His art is in collections around the world including the Tiananmen Museum of the State Department, Beijing; the Beijing International Art Museum, the US Embassy, Beijing, the Shanghai Art Museum, the Zhenghai Art Museum, Zhejiang; the Henan Calligraphy and Painting Institute, the Shenzhen Art Museum, the Bank of China, Hong Kong; the Bali Museum, Indonesia; and in California, the Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento, and the University of California Hastings College of the Law, San Francisco.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.shimoartstudio.com/artist/index.htm>, accessed August 9, 2007.

He has exhibited his work in solo exhibitions in Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, New Zealand, and the US.<sup>2</sup> His most recent exhibitions have been at the California State University, Sacramento (December 2006), and at the Art Shanghai exhibition at the Aosai 奥赛 Art Gallery (September 2007).

Shimo sells his art to different markets. In general, he finds that the styles that appeal most to the buying public in the US and Hong Kong are the opulently beautiful colored lotus and landscape paintings, whereas his patrons in China best understand his subtler and perhaps more authentic work. Nevertheless, Shimo's US audience increasingly is discovering that these subtler works speak to deeper concerns and constitute the more interesting and important portion of Shimo's oeuvre.

Shimo's art is interesting to contemplate in the context of understanding the state of ink painting in today's world art market because it reveals conflicting aesthetic and market forces active in different geographical locations. It reveals the growing aesthetic sophistication of audiences outside of China for Chinese art. It enables us to see the growing strength of purpose of a particular artist who works in China and the US, two powerful nations involved in the yin and yang of "East-West" relations.

At a time of unprecedented economic advancement (the Tang and late Ming Dynasties notwithstanding), at home and internationally, (China now ranks fourth

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<sup>2</sup> *Eastern Sensibility with a Western Flavor: The Art of Shi Mo*, Shenzhen

International Printing Co. Ltd., 2004?, p. 14.

strongest of the world's economies, may surpass Germany into third place by the end of the year, and is poised to become the world's strongest economy by 2010<sup>3</sup>), many Chinese not only must be enjoying their good fortune, but also asking what this all means? Beyond a roof over the head, clothes on the back, and food in the belly, will this newly earned wealth enhance their lives or detract them away from a meaningful existence? When new officially sanctioned high school history texts are written giving the monumentally influential Mao Zedong brief mention,<sup>4</sup> one has to wonder what the Chinese people will – or even will *want* to know about themselves and their history. Moving forward, how will they understand themselves among world cultures? These questions will materialize in the visual arts. The ways in which they play out will be neither uniform nor necessarily obvious. Ink painting, that “essential Chinese” art form, will be but one important element involved in the discourse of identity politics, as will other techniques, such as oil painting, which now are as much a part of Chinese art institutions' curricula as anything else.

Highly adept in many styles, Shimo paints lotuses in monochrome ink on paper, such as *Holy Flowers*, 2004, as well as lotuses in vibrant color and other

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.marketwatch.com/news/story/china-poised-pass-germany-worlds/story.aspx?guid=%7B9A653FE8-70DA-48F3-AE20-44C77B142A0C%7D>, dated July 15, 2007; accessed August 15, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Kahn, “A textbook example of change in China,” *The New York Times*, August 31, 2006.

materials on paper, such as *Heavenly Beauty of the Lotus*, 2007 (Figs. 1 and 2). He paints loosely brushed figurative work of Buddhist deities, such as *A Golden Ring* 金色的環, 2002, oil on canvas (30 x 20 cm.), and *This Old World I*, 放眼看世界 (一), 2004 (247.5 x 123 cm.), ink and acrylic on paper, and *This Old World II*, 放眼看世界 (二), 2004 (68 x 100 cm.), ink and acrylic on paper (Figs. 3-5). And he depicts the literati gentlemen of yesteryear, as in *This Old World IV*, 放眼看世界 (四), 2004 (68 x 68 cm.), ink and acrylic on paper (Fig. 6).

In addition to flowers and figures, Shimo also paints the loosely brushed landscapes in the literati mode, such as *Calling You*, 呼喚, 2001, ink and acrylic on paper, 247.5 x 123 cm. (Fig. 7). Some of these landscapes are of imaginary places, some of actual topology of inspiring sites as widely flung as Tibet, in *Nature's Laurel* 山河的桂冠, 2004, ink and acrylic on paper, 345 x 132.5 cm. (Fig. 8); and a view of the famous California state park at *Yosemite*, 優山美地, 2006, acrylic and diluted oil on paper, 4'6 ½" x 2'3" (Fig. 9).

All of these modes are well executed and demonstrate Shimo's technical virtuosity with both of China's traditional painting modes: the painterly academic or professional (*hangjia* 行家) style, featuring the fine line (*gongbi* 工筆) technique, rich, vivid colors, and an emphasis on the expression of opulent beauty; and the more

linear literati (*wenren* 文人) style, reliant on looser brushwork, blunt though modulating line, texturing dotting, understated or monochrome color, and an emphasis on seeming awkwardness (*zhuo* 拙), and a sketchiness of composition that is nonetheless charged with ideas (*xieyi* 寫意). These paintings also reveal Shimo's recognition that he paints for diverse audiences in a market-driven environment, each demanding different expressions of "Chinese" art. As such, this diverse production by a single artist provides insight into how artists strive to ascertain their place, and that of China in the global arena.

Shimo has taken a new turn in his art. Though he continues to paint displays of the beautiful as in *Heavenly Beauty of the Lotus*, 2007, (Fig. 2) arguing that that is what art (*meishu* 美樹, literally, "the technique of beauty") is, he also increasingly expresses raw emotion and social commentary in his paintings, be they in ink or other media.

We can trace this development through three paintings: a monochrome ink lotus painting, *Holy Flowers* from 2004 (381.5 x 192.5 cm.) (Fig. 1); a scorching red landscape from 2006 (Fig. 10); and a new series of paintings in oil just completed in the summer of 2007 (Fig. 11). Two of these fall within the literati tradition of *xieyi* ("sketched ideas"); the third into a symbolist mode. Though Shimo's literati mode relies on a centuries-old tradition, and his symbolist mode is but a mere hundred-plus

years in age, both are equally relevant to (Chinese) artistic production in the twenty-first century.

*Holy Flowers*, 2004, is a large-scale painting with an emphatically strong impact on the viewer (Fig.1). Painted in ink on paper, it measures 381.5 x 192.5 cm. (Artist's Collection, on loan to California State University, Sacramento). Shimo ably expresses the fragility and resilience of the lotus plant. An icon of the Buddhist belief system, the lotus grows up pure and clean from the muck below, and is thereby a fitting symbol of the purity of the Buddhist doctrine and the spiritual innocence of the devotee. While the fragile lotus flower grows at the tip of slender stalks, these erect stalks seem as strong as iron wire, and well symbolize the strength of the Buddhist doctrine. This surely also represents the intense focus of the artist's mind as he contemplated his new life in the US, and his hopes for his family there, far from their ancestral home.

*Holy Flowers* represents the best of Shimo's art with an honesty, directness, and integration of vision and purpose. This is contemporary water-ink – Chinese water-ink painting at its best. It provides a personal statement about the artist's experiences and hopes, as well as his assertions of faith, of confidence, and his desire to grow and flourish regardless of any challenges or setbacks. It is such paintings as this that sustain the ancient tradition of Chinese ink painting and keep it vital.

Like *Holy Flowers*, *Attraction of Red*, 2006 (Fig. 10), also relies on the traditions of water-ink painting, though Shimo transforms the tradition through the materials of acrylic and diluted oil on paper. The painting measures 4'6 ½" x 2'3",

and is in the collection of the artist. In *Attraction of Red*, the viewer confronts a mountainous landscape that seems to squeeze any possibility of life out of the terrain. Two eagles rise up and out of a narrow fjord, while a lone fisherman awaits a catch offshore. The inhospitable landscape is painted in deep reds, blacks, and touches of white, with wrinkled, unraveled hemp-like strokes (*pima cun* 皮麻皴) of the literati master Wang Meng's (c. 1308-1385) restless and claustrophobic landscape tradition. In contrast, the quiet fisherman is painted in the fine-line professional mode, yet touched with mild, cool greens and traces of mauve. Though only a small element in the much larger composition, the fisherman is the focus of this painting.

Shimo says that he made this painting during a time of personal agitation, when he felt frustrated at a lack of ability to communicate his ideas with others. The red landscape expresses his intense frustration, the fine-line fisherman the calm he sought.<sup>5</sup>

This painting is interesting because it reveals a personal, intimate aspect of the artist. Although it can hardly count as beautiful, *mei* 美, a strength of character and inner purpose is revealed. Uncomfortable and unpleasant, this painting represents internal struggles and the opportunity for new questions, and consequently new answers and new intellectual growth. Compared with the more conventionally

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<sup>5</sup> Shimo, interview with the author, August 7, 2007.

appealing *Heavenly Beauty of the Lotus* (2007), *Attraction in Red* dares to take an untrodden path.

With this mindset of existential questions and the agitation of the transcultural citizen still in place, Shimo returned to his homeland in Summer 2007 after three years absence. Home is a place we expect and perhaps need to stay stable, secure, and unchanged. Anyone who lives in China, travels here with some frequency, or even just reads the daily newspaper has to be conscious that China has changed radically -- and continues to change radically from one day to the next. Conscious of this we may be, but it is still a shock to the returning visitor, or in the case of Shimo, the homebound son.

After three years away, Shimo was startled at the extreme changes that had taken place in China during his absence. He had acquired the distance to see them as both insider and outsider. Though excited by the boom in the economy and the many changes to the urban landscape, he was disturbed that people's psychological condition seemed empty compared to the past. Therefore, he made a series of eight oil paintings called *The Invisible Strength* in English, and *Fenmu* 分目 in Chinese, as a social commentary to urge people to bring their psychological life and material life into balance (Figs. 11-12). (The series is currently held by the Aosai 奥赛 Art Gallery in Shanghai.)

The source of the Chinese title, *Fenmu* 分目, is the word *pan* 盼 “to hope for a desired outcome.” Shimo’s title, however, splits the character *pan* 盼 into halves and inverts them into *fen* “to divide” 分 and *mu* “eyes” 目, to suggest the uncertain focus of these figures and their feelings of disappointment. Shimo notes that although many people in China now have more money than ever before, they do not know what to do with it, with the consequence that their emotional and intellectual life is split from their physical and material existence. In this series of paintings, dazed and anonymous figures walk along, their eyes appearing lost and confused (*mi mu* 迷目), revealing their psychologically lost state.

In *The Invisible Strength VIII*, (Fig. 11), a clump of people trudges along together through a deserted landscape. They move forward with determination, yet their destination is unknown. White lines run across the composition to express their unsettled minds and disturbed mental state. The ambiguity of purpose is emphasized as some figures at the vanguard hold white flags of surrender, while others hold rifles of attack. The heads of some of the figures at the back of the crowd are touched with red, indicating their foundational schooling in the Communist doctrine.

Of this work, Shimo adds:

画面中的人物有的有眼睛、有的什么都没有，这是表现社会的不同阶层，有眼的是代表有地位的人群，没眼的是代表社会的下层人物都在迷茫，他们除了追求金钱外，都没有远大的人生目标。<sup>6</sup>

The figures in the painting, some have eyes, some don't. This is to represent society's unequal social classes. Those with eyes symbolize people with social standing. Those without eyes represent society's lower stratum who are in ignorant and in the dark. Besides chasing after money, they don't have the good fortune to have goals in their lives.

Although *The Invisible Strength I*, is numbered 1, it actually was the last painting produced for the series, and *The Invisible Strength VIII* was actually the first. Whereas *The Invisible Strength VIII* is about social inequality, *The Invisible Strength I* (Fig. 12) reveals Shimo's anxiety over the sorry fate of even of China's well-to-do children.

Shimo argues that children in wealthy families are so reliant upon their family's wealth that they never can become independent. This idea is represented in *The Invisible Strength I* by the child painted in dark blue in the upper right. The child's arm barely moves away from his body, indicating that the child is permitted little voluntary movement or independence. A chunk of his head is missing, as if

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<sup>6</sup> Shimo, email to the author, August 10, 2007.

someone took a bite out of it. These features symbolize the concept that because even well-to-do families are not encouraging physical and intellectual independence of their sole heirs, even these privileged children simply cannot fully develop intellectually. To the left of the child, a mother throws her head back in anguish, frustrated at her inability to change the systemic issue. To the right of the child is a white-faced figure and parts of toothy mouths. In fact, these are only masks, representing the notion that some people are superficially nice, but their behaviors camouflage submerged aggression. Shimo is troubled that this situation is abetted by adults who are not necessarily always truthful to their children. He feels that this is “like putting on a facemask and telling them only good things.” In the lower area of the painting, toes seek to connect with ground, but cannot indicating these figures’ instability and lack of a firm foundation. As such, none of these people are dependable because they all are too reliant on others. As in *The Invisible Strength VIII*, the white lines running across the composition expresses these figures’ psychological agitation.

Shimo notes that although Chinese children are much loved, there is too often the danger that they also are being smothered by the dotting care of the six adults (two parents and four grandparents) in their families. Unable to escape the weight of this devoted attention, the children can never do anything by themselves, and never develop the skills necessary to survive without their parents. Therefore, Shimo made

this painting to urge Chinese people to realize they must encourage their children to be more self-reliant.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the cautionary expression, the subtext of this series is *pan*, ‘hope for a desired outcome.’ Shimo does not give up on Chinese society, but knows that people must start making important changes and conscious choices to better their lot, and that of China. Economic improvement is one means toward enhancing a life, but a broad and sound education ultimately is the most powerful.

While Shimo’s opulently colored paintings represent an essentialized Chineseness to acquisitive patrons, the three paintings just discussed are even more important because they represent a growing sophistication and intellectualization of the artist, his audience, and the global art world. We can trace an important aspect of China’s contemporary art world development through his art. With skill and technical aptitude already at high levels, we see a growing strength of purpose and expression, and renewed strength and hope for the contemporary painters of China -- not so much for their market success, which is a *fait accompli*, but as bearers of their great traditions.

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<sup>7</sup> Shimo, interview with the author, August 1, 2007.

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