

Shimo: Forces Meeting

Shimo (born 1962) breaks the rules of traditional Chinese painting. In his attempt to broaden the possibilities of traditional ink and wash, he aims to imbue his work with new power, expression, and contemporary perspectives that extend the artful grace of ancient scholar painting. Shimo is determined in this pursuit. “A painter must be individual,” he explains, “without individuality one cannot be an artist. I am against two extremes in Chinese paintings. One is totally ancient, traditional—impossible. The other is entirely westernized—which for me would be empty.”¹

In an effort to find his own voice, Shimo has set himself a course, one that respects and affirms the traditions of his heritage and one that is also westernized, departing from the old to reflect the truly global force that China has become politically, economically, and artistically. The pursuit has not always been easy, and achieving just the right balance has been met with many successes, and even more failures. Bringing emotional vigor to traditional painting required experimentation, and the apparent speed with which his paintings are produced is belied by extensive trial and error. For every painting he chooses to keep, he throws a dozen away. “People only see that a painter could finish an ink and wash painting in a matter of minutes,” he explains. “But what they do not see are thousands of drafts the artist had thrown away in order to create a product that the artist deemed acceptable.”²

Shimo is certainly not the first Chinese painter to attempt to bring new vision to Chinese art by looking to western prototypes. The celebrated Chinese painter Zhang Daqian (1899–1983)

¹ Shimo, “Distinguished Characteristics & Special Styles,” Shimo Art Studio, website, www.Shimoartstudio.com, 2004.

² Shimo, “Lotus—The Only Thing to Love,” Shimo Art Studio, website, www.Shimoartstudio.com, 2004.

turned to French Impressionism to inform his works. And, as Shimo would later do, he established a residence in California, in his case Carmel-by-the-Sea, a magnificent setting that impacted his landscapes. Shimo is certainly familiar with the master's work. As a child, he studied with landscape painter Liu Kansheng, a student of Zhang Daqian. This lineage is inescapable.

Rather than looking to the Impressionists as Zhang Daqian had done, Shimo informs his own approach by drawing from more recent western paintings of greater pertinence to his generation—a generation that has experienced China's international reengagement. He is especially influenced by the Abstract Expressionists of the 1940s and 50s, the preeminent artistic movement of the postwar era. Like these artists, Shimo begins by creating rigorous formal abstractions that are expressive, self-referential, and physical. Like so many Abstract Expressionists, Shimo often works on the floor, a fact necessitated by the scale of many of his paintings. He uses long, loaded brushes to push ink and color into nebulous shapes that can later be defined as landscapes, flowers, or even figures. Layer upon layer, the pools dry, creating the artist's signature rippling surface, a technique he describes as “ji-mo”—accumulated or dripping ink. Shimo must dance around his large sheets of paper and works from every angle, a practice exemplified in the western art canon by Jackson Pollock. Shimo's results, however, are decidedly more in keeping with broad, saturated “stain” paintings introduced by Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, and others of the Color Field movement. These artists, like Shimo, dripped, stained, poured, and sometimes even mopped their media directly onto canvas or paper. The outcome—floating pools of gorgeous color and diaphanous surfaces—was truly about the process, the medium, and the formal elements of painting.

To be sure, Shimo respects such formality, but believes firmly that the ultimate purpose of art (*meishu*, literally “the technique of beauty”) is to express a formal beauty.³ Not only does his method result in rich, velvety fields of saturated color, but his specially designed papers, which include flecks of metal that show through the paint and add sparkle to his surfaces, are elegant in and of themselves. Yet Shimo’s training and heritage does not allow him to rest on the formal elements of Color Field painting. He seeks to make the subjective tangible and the immaterial real by bringing narrative to what could function independently as pure abstraction. “How should the contemporary ink and wash art develop?” he asks.

In contemporary Chinese painting, those who are outstanding have received education in both eastern and western art. They have the ability to combine ancient traditions with a contemporary spirit, melting the national aesthetics of eastern and western art in one furnace. But, I want to emphasize that nationalism is the mother of art. The national nature of the art has been developed from social and aesthetic practice and has its own independent characters and aesthetic system. By broadening ones vision to recognize and utilize traditions, the creation of new forms and techniques is unavoidable.⁴

This dilemma unfolds in the Crocker Art Museum’s pivotal painting *Forces Meeting* (2004). A monumental work in white and myriad greens, the forces that meet are western abstraction and 2,000 years of traditional Chinese ink painting (*shuimo hua*). This, like many of his mature paintings features lotus flowers, an iconic symbol in Buddhism, which, because it springs forth untainted from the murky bottoms of a pond, denotes holiness and purity—both of the Buddhist doctrine and of the devote. In *Forces Meeting*, pristine white lotuses are paired with green fields in a pond of silver serenity. There is no animation in the subject, except at the

³ Katharine P. Burnett, “Mixing Water and Oil: Understanding Shimo in the Contemporary Global Art Market,” in *Heaven: A Collection of ShiMo’s Contemporary Painting* (Sacramento: Shimo Art Gallery, 2008), p. 6.

⁴ Shimo, “My Opinion on Arts,” Shimo Art Studio, website, www.Shimoartstudio.com, 2004.

bottom of the composition in the form of two tiny, red carp. Although their presence is miniscule in the grandness of the composition, their importance to the message is pivotal. Swimming together as yin and yang, they symbolize the joining of East and West.

Shimo knew early on that he would pursue art as a career. Born Cheng Yiwei in Shanghai on May 28, 1962, his penchant for art—and love of nature—was instilled by Liu Kansheng, who fostered his devotion to painting the landscape. As a youth, Shimo spent many hours outdoors drawing while other children played under the hot summer sun or in the chill of winter. Shimo also trained with the well-known artist Zhang Dazhuang, a faculty member at the Shanghai Chinese Painting Academy, who inspired his deep respect for traditional Chinese painting techniques.

After high school, Shimo enrolled for four years at the Art College of the People's Liberation Army in Beijing. There, he studied oil and set painting and in 1983 received his bachelor's degree. He then went to Shenzhen to study at the Shenzhen Painting Institute, but gave this up to go into art publishing. Later, he made the decision to return to painting when he pursued a masters degree at the Shanghai University Art Institute (Shanghai daxue meishu xueyuan). He graduated in 2003 and has since divided his time between Shanghai and Sacramento, California.

Shimo's Shanghai studio is filled with inspiration, not only in the form of paintings, but porcelains, carvings and, in his back yard, a lotus pond. Lotus flowers, which he often renders in combination not only with fish but egrets, kingfishers, and other waterfowl, occupied him almost exclusively during the 1990s. These increasingly gave way to landscapes and figures in the twenty-first century, an evolution due in part to his travels and his move to the United States.

Beginning in 2004, Shimo made the first of many visits to Tibet. These trips resulted in numerous studies of the country's majestic mountains and lakes and a series of paintings that he

entitled the “Heavenly Lakes in the Land of Snows.” In these paintings, he sought to locate and secure the soul of the terrain, communicating its underlying sublimity by combining bold abstraction with traditional ink and wash. The denseness of the mountain setting contrasts dramatically with the purity of the lake, which is typically rendered through white paper left bare. And, as in his lotus paintings, narrative and subjects of human interest are included through fine-line details, in this case houses and fishing boats. Yet these presences, like the tiny minnows or carp swimming among the lotus, are dwarfed by the immensity of nature.

Shimo’s aesthetic strategy in the Tibetan paintings reveals the enduring influence of the late Ming/early Qing Dynasty artist Shitao (1642–1707), known for his revolutionary paintings that deal with humanity’s place in nature. Shimo has long revered Shitao for challenging accepted standards of beauty and for breaking with tradition to pursue his own course. Shitao’s influence is also evident in the figurative works that Shimo created at the same time as the Tibetan landscapes. His depictions of the sixth-century Buddhist monk Da Mo are deceptively simple in execution and take full advantage of empty expanses of paper.

It has only been in the last decade that the human figure has become the focus of Shimo’s work. He has recently embarked on two new series, “Heavenly Light” (2007) and “Heaven” (2007–08), which have taken his art in an entirely new direction. These, now in oil and mixed-media on canvas rather than ink on paper, deal almost exclusively with the human form. They also leave no room for tranquility—or even breathing space. Here, Shimo attempts to capture an emerging feeling of congestion, confusion, and alienation that he senses among the Chinese populace and that he too feels. He started the series after a trip to Shanghai in the summer of 2007. Having been away from his homeland for three years, he was stunned by the rapid transformation found everywhere. He now brings an outsider’s perspective to his native land, and at the same time is constantly reminded of the harshness of his childhood during China’s

Cultural Revolution when his family was turned out on the street and sheltered by relatives. When he returned to Sacramento following this visit, Shimo tried to vent his conflicting feelings and memories, creating paintings that were no longer serenely beautiful, but angry, fractured, and in aggressive juxtapositions of colors connoting fear. As China had taken its preeminent place as a leader on the world stage, Shimo rendered the harsher realities of that change—greed, emptiness, inequity, helplessness, and poverty.

This new interest in the figure also stemmed from Shimo's emerging sense of becoming a California artist. Since the 1950s, the figure has been paramount in California, particularly in the north, most notably defining a style known as Bay Area figuration. Adapting the gestural brushwork of Abstract Expressionism to the human form and other subjects, these Bay Area painters brought a new sense of alienation to figures that were aloof, totemic, melancholic, and sometimes even menacing. Aiming to couple his assimilation of a new western style with western techniques, Shimo has looked closely at the color, style, and reductive abstraction of these iconic works, which have in turn informed the mood and approach of his own figurative paintings. The expressionism of Pablo Picasso also factors into his production, as does a more mystical, spiritual element that seems to stem in part from the paintings of Georges Rouault as well as Shimo's own conflicting emotions. In the end, Shimo drew this series to a close with more questions than answers and ultimately eliminated the figure altogether in favor of pure color and form.

Yet for Shimo, art has always been about beauty, and thus his forays into disillusionment, brutality, and social justice could not last long. When he returned to China again, he went with an attitude of acceptance, helping to move him past dismay toward a quieter resignation and, ultimately, inner harmony. He now looks not for signs of China's social ills, but for harmony and tranquility. He finds it in Shanghai's Xijiao Park, where he observes and photographs swans

and then paints them back in his studio. In oil on canvas, they swim gracefully amid painterly brushstrokes and expressive drips representing the cacophony of the modern city. Their ghostly, drifting apparitions also manifest Shimo's continuing quest for beauty, which he now finds exemplified in the white magnificence of the swan, a living, breathing evocation of nature that is closely related, and enduringly rooted, in the fragile purity of the lotus.

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