

MEMORIES AND REFLECTIONS

Fong Chung-Ray

21 March 2015

If a person sets their mind on a goal and strives for 50 or 60 years, they will accomplish something. I have been painting for 60 years, during which I have travelled to many places and seen most of the celebrated masterpieces in fine arts. As I see it, a masterpiece should be perfect in artistic treatment, inspiring in substance, and genuinely touching as a whole.

It is impossible as much as futile to compare an artist's work with another. An artist should gauge their work against their own repertoire to see if it has deepened and matured with time. As one enters old age, the surroundings change along with one's experience, mindset, and understanding of art. Some grow stubborn, while others return to innocence. Some reach the limits of their talent and can only repeat themselves. I often caution myself that if one day my creativity runs dry, I may as well devote myself to meditation and spiritual practice. Fortunately I still have the drive to create, and I am able to keep painting.

Looking back, my understanding of art has also been constantly evolving. In the early days I thought copying nature was the only way to paint. As many Western painters worked on depicting scenery and I leaned toward Western art, I spent a year or two practicing the craft and looking for scenery with my easel every day. Later on I saw that many Chinese *shan shui* ("mountain-water") paintings are imaginative renditions rather than realistic representations, and that creation lies not only in technique but also in the conception of substance. I stopped painting scenery from life and created my own compositions in my studio, as I tried not to fall back on old-fashioned techniques.

Around 1960 I discovered abstract expressionist paintings that felt both new and familiar to me. Looking at the development of Eastern art and that of Western art, I think abstract expressionism marks the stage where the two share the most intersections. The influences of Eastern art were evident early on as Impressionists were inspired by Japanese ukiyo-e. The New York School artists exemplified Eastern

echoes in their work in the 1950s, before the trends shifted back to Western sensibilities. Yet the abstract style knows no geographical boundary, and it seems like a natural course of development for art to transform from the figurative to the abstract. Even without the exchanges between the East and West, Chinese painting would have reached this stage sooner or later.

In 1960 I began to paint in the abstract style, which made me one of its early advocates in Taiwan. Some fellow painters returned to figurative painting later, while I persisted on my path. From 1964 to around 1975, I focused on ink painting to distinguish my work from Western painting. Later on I felt that the difference between Eastern art and Western art should lie in the spirit, and that it was unimportant to stress the difference in form. For all their merits, the tools of ink painting also have many drawbacks; for instance, they fall short on conveying the sense of roughness and weight. After moving to the US, I started painting on canvas again and switched to acrylic. The paint may be used as it is in oil painting, or it may be diluted to resemble ink. It does not have a strong smell, and it may be blended with other media to create diverse effects.

It takes energy to work in art for such a long time, and I draw it mainly from my quest for understanding of time and space. What is this universe I exist in about? While there are all kinds of answers to that question, they do not echo how I feel. It may be impossible to find the ultimate answer. Art is a visual expression of one's own answer; the external world is volatile and, in the end, illusory. My work is the tangible manifestation of my feeling. My interest also drives my creation. From conception and preparation of materials, through the stages of painting, evaluation and revision to completion, it is a joyous process for me to work on a painting. If the work resonates with the viewers, it brings even greater joy.

In the early eras of the Qing Dynasty, the work of Yangzhou painters already came close to the abstract style. In the past, those of us who pledged to revive Chinese painting were victims of conceit. The goal should be to devote ourselves to painting without any lofty ideals, as work is a form of giving in itself. Creating with a still heart is like entering the Buddhist state of meditative absorption Samadhi, and it is also a kind of spiritual practice.