

The Nature of Painting: The Extraordinary Artistry of Chang Yi-Hsiung

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The opportunity to write an introduction for the Taiwanese painter Chang Yi-Hsiung's catalog is a considerable honor for a Western art critic. I am always eager to learn about the achievements of significant artists in other parts of the world, particularly in East Asia where I have traveled numerous times over the past two decades. Chang's work as a painter, which embodies his personal history, offers a distinct and provocative insight not only in relation to Taiwanese culture, but also in the way we experience the artist's special insight as an interpreter of visual reality. While Chang's educational breakthrough occurred in Japan, which was true for many important Asian painters of his generation, the breadth of his subject matter, his formal comprehension, and his technical knowledge were – and still are – very much within the scope of a rarified sensibility. Simply put, Chang's paintings elicit a way to see the everyday world as it appears to Taiwanese people. Moreover, by going deeply within himself, his paintings have attained universal stature in the sense that people from various parts of the world can relate to their beauty and humanity.

Upon discovering the paintings of Chang Yi-Hsiung, I find a certain intimacy within them. While his views of nature and people are inextricably linked to the construction of abstract form, they also retain a personal quality that does not advertise itself in terms of noise or intimidation. Chang offers us a precious humility, a way of seeing the world that brings us down to our senses and takes us outside the conflicts that reside between thought and emotion. Traditional Chinese art is strongly aligned with Buddhism. In this sense, Chang's paintings suggest an emptiness of mind, a stillness that subsumes mundane routines. His paintings take us into another world -- a world induced by the pure pleasure of color and line. Chang's ability to conjure form through space, and concurrently, space through form, is apparent in each mark of the brush. Whether a landscape, a village scene, or a portrait, each painting beckons us on a new journey as we enter a fictional space through the window of the picture plane.

The paintings of Chang reveal the artist's extraordinary ability to see reality not merely as an external visual phenomenon, but more importantly as an internal manifestation of the Tao – the true spirit and the pure way. Paradoxically, however, Chang is still a Modernist painter. His is an artist not only of the twentieth century into which he was born, but also of the twenty-first century where he offers inspiration and guidance toward a new sensory universe of feeling. Chang is a visionary painter with a unique style that blends aspects of French painting with hidden aspects of traditional Chinese painting. While his subject matter includes such varied themes as country landscapes, village scenes, vases of flowers, farm animals, Venetian canals, the streets of

Montmartre, portraits of young women and circus clowns, one senses a consistency of feeling through his use of the brush and his ability to exercise emotional restraint. Chang's style is a hybrid – both formal and expressionist -- that has evolved over many decades of work. A recipient of many honors since he was awarded First Prize for his painting "Autumn Night" in the Sixth Annual Taiwan Provincial Exhibition (1951), he has maintained a direction in which creative experimentation and intuition continue to play a major role.

Having had the advantage of exposure through exhibitions mounted in France and Japan, Chang -- along with the "New Art Movement" generation of artists -- came of age in the thirties, a decade after the founding of the Taiwan Fine Arts Exhibition (1927). By the early fifties, as the Western influence in art began to spread. Concurrent with Taiwan's economic growth and social stability, these painters represented an important school of painting that would eventually offer a necessary chapter and a unique contribution to the history of Chinese art. During this period, Chang and his colleagues focused on integrating abstract form and color into traditional subject matter. Even as figurative expressionism emerged in Mainland China on the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, Chang Yi-Hsiung, and his artist-colleagues, Liao Te-Cheng, Hong Ruie-Lin, and Chen Te-Wang maintained their course as painters committed to an Impressionist vision of nature. These Taiwanese painters continued to embrace the early innovations of Cezanne, Gauguin, and the Fauve paintings of Matisse. While Modernism in Taiwan was arguably in advance of the emerging avant-garde movement on the Mainland by the eighties, it is important to distinguish and clarify the different points of origin and evolutions among these divergently talented artists, separated arbitrarily by political boundaries.

No matter where the direction the art is going, artists will rarely, if ever, agree about anything. Inevitably, the form and content emanating through the works of Taiwanese painters working in Taiwan, Europe, or the United States, began to move along separate trajectories. While the landscapes and cottages of Liao Te-Cheng appear similar to those of Chen Cheng-Po, they each have retained a definitive and personal style. This would be true of other painters in the group as well – Hong Ruie-Lin and Chen Te Wang, for example. Yet, it is also important to acknowledge what they continue to have in common. Each of these "New Art" artists abides by the same deeply felt aesthetic principles that governed their art from the beginning. Today, with very few surviving members, Chang Yi-Hsiung continues to discover new possibilities for interpreting abstract ideas borrowed primarily from his strong connection to French culture. While he no longer needs to escape the orthodox traditions of his Chinese heritage, he has over the years acquired a deep appreciation for what he has gained by living and working in France. Chang continues to paint avidly and to maintain a spirit of exploration and investigation by utilizing new forms and subject matter that reveal his strong poetic involvement with nature.

Nature is the key to Chang's paintings. One can see it in all aspects of his work -- both in his oils and his watercolors. One can see the dynamic repose of nature in his street scenes of Paris, the canals of Venice, the palaces of Tokyo, the villages in France, and the outlying countryside south of Taipei. Nature is present everywhere, even in his drawings and the watercolors of the female nude. In Asia, nature is omniscient and is perceived in greater depth than how it is viewed in the West. After painting his famous mixed medium work, entitled Zero (2000), revealing the legs and feet of a hanged man -- for which he received critical acclaim --, Chang continued to work in reference to nature and began experimenting with Cubism in his portraits of woman, lovers, and his famous clowns.

Over the years, Chang has been enraptured by Picasso and Matisse, by l'Ecole de Paris painters, such as Dufy and Rouault, by the linear curves in Bonnard's nudes and by the trembling vibrations in empty Utrillo's street scenes. Yet Chang always puts something of himself in these paintings. No matter how French they might appear, there is always an ingredient somewhere in his paintings that belongs to his Asian heritage. There is always the insight and flavor of his own special sensibility that constitutes an offering to nature. Chang gives back to nature in his paintings what nature brings to him. His paintings suggest a kind of symbiosis or synchronicity within the events of everyday life. He recognizes the pervasiveness of nature in art. He searches for nature's secrets in the

scent and visual splendor of flowers, animals, trees, mountains, and grassy plains. Chang wants to elevate nature beyond the normative tradition of realist painting and thus to transform its appearance through Modernism. His passion is to experience painting as an impressionist act and to bring forth new images. This is what gives his paintings the strength and vitality that is so rich, sustaining, and ultimately durable.

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