

## **Lo Ch'ing and the Postmodern Landscape: An Interview**

*The following interview with Lo Ch'ing took place via Skype as part of the research for the exhibition Lo Ch'ing: The Poetry of Postmodern Landscape. The interview was conducted by Suzie Kim and Raino Ito (with additional questions written by Lindsay DuPertuis) on April 2, 2015. The interview has been edited for clarity.*

### **Can you tell us a little about your work's relationship to the history of Chinese landscape painting, and about your representations of the different seasons?**

**Lo:** In China, in the very beginning, landscape paintings served as backgrounds or backdrops for figure paintings. Usually you see in paintings before Tang Dynasty that landscape only serve as a stage for important people; high ranking officials or emperors. While they were traveling or experiencing major historical events, and so on, these were worthwhile things for a painter to record. And then landscape appeared. But when it moves toward the end of the Tang Dynasty and the beginning of early Song Dynasty, all of a sudden there are revolutionary changes. The first one is of course the landscape painting moving from a colorful one to black and white, which is a monochrome, ink painting, which is unique because it is against the ordinary experience, because you experience landscape with distinctive seasonal changes with all kinds of different colors.

Wang Wei attempted to express the external world, but tried to use the inner demand or inner purpose, that is—trying to create a very simple world... then the best way to do it is to use black and white. But of course the black and white thing is against the contemporary concept of art. Landscapes became spiritual portraits of the artist himself. From the 10th century, you can see that the people who are moving in the landscape are not high officials anymore, they are insignificant people, like woodcutters and fishermen, and so on, and these people carry a sort of symbolism in them. These people are used as symbols to suggest the painter's ideal state of mind. And so the trees in the landscape, all the images included in the landscape, are carefully selected to portray the inner self, the philosophical ideas of the painter, rather than a faithful recording of external reality.

### **How do notions of time and space relate to both your poetry and your painting?**

**Lo:** For a landscape painter, there are two different levels. The first one is how to render spatial order to correspond to the temporal order. This has a deep root in the Chinese language. For me, for instance, when I'm using English to narrate, then I have to pay attention to the present tense: whether I want to use Wang-Wei 'is' a great poet or Wang-Wei 'has been' or 'was' a great poet. But in Chinese, we don't have that. From my understanding, English is a reflective language—you have present tense, future tense, and past tense. And when this transforms into the visual experience, then you have to develop eventually into the Renaissance time of foreground, middle ground, and background. And then you have to know how the spatial order is arranged. And then plus the time element—that is, the source of light—so you use chiaroscuro and this kind of technique to show time.

But in Chinese painting, we don't have that. In Chinese painting, how to arrange spatial order and then temporal order becomes a different concern. Chinese painters pay attention not to the external changing of light and space but the internal changing of light. For instance, there are many famous anecdotal legends or stories that relates to this aspect. When the Song Emperor Huizong, who was a great painter and connoisseur, was judging a water buffalo painting, he said: 'this water buffalo is not good because you painted a water buffalo in evening time, but this buffalo is still sinking or floating

in the river. This is not right. Only in the noontime would the water buffalo do that. By the evening, it would definitely come up to the shore instead of staying in the river or water'. When the famous painter Ouyang Xiu was invited to view a painting with a cat and a peony flower, he immediately recognized it was a very good painting as it showed the peony flower at noontime and a cat at noontime. When his esquires asked him how he could tell that, he said the petals of the peony flower were striving in the morning time with the morning bee. But then in the noontime when they receive the sunshine from directly above, then the petals droop a little bit and the eyes of a cat will turn into one line. This shows this is a noontime cat and a noontime peony flower.

Chinese painters did away with the chiaroscuro thing, and tried to build the inner relationship between the object, the plants and the animal and the time. So, in this case, you see the cat under the peony flower—there is no shadow around. But as a matter of fact, an object, the shape, that is, the situation of the painted object is showing that there is a time element in it. Then, as for the landscape, a Chinese painter will never stand at a fixed point to look at the mountain because the view is limited. You cannot say there is only foreground, middle ground, and background, then all the mountains will look the same. Then, the painter is required to travel to the mountain, and then after he gets familiar with it, then he can choose his favorite spot and reorganize the space and the composition to show the features he enjoyed most into the painting. Consequently, the painting itself is a sort of portrait of the artist, in a way.

### **Could you speak a little about the theme of travel in your work?**

**Lo:** My major concern is—I was born after World War 2. When I began to learn Chinese painting, I followed a very famous Manchu prince, Fu-shin Yu. I guess I was lucky because I was probably one of his youngest students at the age of 12. I had the opportunity to learn in a very traditional way, a point of view from an agricultural world, or agrarian society. That is, the idea that you should respect nature and you should be one with nature, and so on. As a matter of fact, when I examined my own life, I was using telephones, taking buses, riding motorcycles, and so on. For me, I feel acutely that I'm a person who is moving from an agrarian society into an industrial society.

When I was 22-23, I traveled a lot by railroad, in cars, and then finally airplanes... and then went abroad and travelled around the world. Then, my experience of landscape was completely different from my predecessors, who were limited to China only.

As a matter of fact, my teacher moved from Mainland China to the tropical islands. For him, it was a new experience. According to Chinese Confucian scholars, one of the first things he did was use a traditional type of scholarship to study plants, the mineral production, the environments, including the fish, the flowers. But, this view is still limited from an agricultural point of view. I think it's my responsibility to introduce new elements to this old world. In the very beginning, within a very short period of time, all of these traditional painting languages became useless, and I felt I should invent a new one. Later, I began to realize that the continuity of language is very important. The old language is also very useful because the old idioms are following the old syntax and syntax patterns, but if you introduce new phrases and new terms/terminologies, then you can make it new. I often use this example, because I am writing poetry as well. Then I realized that for the traditional Chinese poets when they refer to the moon, they use the sort of euphemistic type of language to describe moon as 'the jade rabbit' because of a mythological reference, or 'a flying mirror,' or something like that, or 'chan juan'—a very archaic word to describe the moon... but then, that kind of moon is born in a mythological world. When we have no new scientific knowledge, like the solar system, then we have

new Chinese words... we have new words, like the moon orbit... the word 'moon' is very ancient. But before 20th century, no one ever put those two characters together. But then, we have these new cosmos. This new terminology is introduced using age-old Chinese characters, or Chinese words or phrases, making a new word. It's like a complete new ideology or value system. So I think, for me, I was extremely lucky, I was very well-versed with the traditional painting language and this allows me to introduce new elements.

Usually in traditional Chinese landscape, you have the winding path, and this zig-zag is traveled by woodcutters or by a recluse or by a famous poet or travelers. But now the road is built with modern technology, and there is speed. So when you introduce a road into landscape painting, how do you show its features? You need to find a helicopter for an aerial view. Then the speed or the power, the distinguishing features of the asphalt road, can be shown. You have to create new compositions, a new point of view.

When I painted, I used the Chinese grass calligraphic technique to do it...the calligraphic element is introduced into landscape painting. But then I used a very hard-edged method to portray this industrial image, which is somehow like an intruder into an idyllic pastoral scene. By the contrast of these two, it's also showing the conflict, the problems between the industrial world and the agrarian world.

### **Do you think there is an ecological awareness present in your work?**

**Lo:** Oh yes, definitely. Because, well, I can tell you very frankly that nowadays I like to travel...as a matter of a fact, after 1979, when mainland China opened its doors to the world, I grasped my chance to travel to all these important, famous, scenic spots or mountains in mainland China. But of course, about one hundred years ago, travelers—to do that kind of travelling, they would have to find themselves a donkey, first: riding the donkey and taking boats and so on. Moving around in the mountain areas.

But for me, I can take an airplane, a bus or even a cable car to carry me directly to the top of the mountain. Of course, I felt a little bit guilty about this, because I read all these diaries and travelogues and everything of the famous ancient travelers. They had to carry their own rice and even, water, and food, and coal, to be able to cook their own meals during their travel.

But for me, all this can be done within a few minutes...I can visit Yellow Mountain, Huangshan—it's an ideal or sacred mountain for all the Chinese landscape painters. In the past they had to spend a week or two from the bottom of the mountain to climb to the top. Now it's only, by cable car, 25 minutes and you reach the peak or the most scenic spots of the mountain areas.

And then of course using cell phones, staying in a hotel with modern facilities: you have the beautiful scene with clouds and pine trees and peaks outside the window but inside your room there's a television screen showing a landscape of Switzerland or North America, or Canadian maple trees. So there are all these mixtures of images, combining the local and the exotic of foreign view into one space. But there are still moments when I walk into a valley or a quiet place...then, for me, it's not a problem to experience it the way the painters or the travelers experienced it 1,000 years ago or 800 years ago, because at that particular moment, in this particular period of time, with a time machine, I can travel back to the Song Dynasty.

And so that sort of feeling makes me feel that I have to somehow faithfully find a way to reflect or capture this schizophrenia...this schizophrenic type of experience. Within 12 hours, you can experience this atmosphere like that of the Song Dynasty or Tang Dynasty and within the next 12 hours you are in the modern world, in this very small room...but you can open the window, and then again you see a very classical landscape with the drama of the peaks and mist outside. I think if I can record that faithfully, my landscape is not only the portrait of myself, but also the portrait of my time.

### **Are your paintings meant to integrate all of the senses, rather than simply sight?**

**Lo:** This is a very interesting question. I think, as a painter and a poet, ...as an artist, you have to be very sensitive. It's no problem to open all your senses to the external world: smell, sound, touch, everything. But when you try to squeeze or collect these experiences and then re-organize them into a work of art, then you need some kind of selection and control, and for me, in the first place, I have to have good tools to do that, that tool for the painter is the painting language. I feel that my knowledge of the traditional painting language is a great help to me to experience something new, because I think that Chinese painting is very different from that of the West as far as the language is concerned.

I don't know whether you paint or not, but when you study oil painting you are required to do sketches, and usually as a beginner you are required to paint plaster busts or a plate of fruit, mostly bananas or apples, using that as a medium to express yourself, to find your technique, to figure out how to express the volume and the color and the substance of the object you are trying to portray or depict.

But in Chinese painting, it is totally the opposite. What Chinese painters will say is, if you want to do a painting, you have to paint a meaningful object, a symbolic one, an object with a cultural reference. If it's just this ordinary object like an orange, it's not worthwhile to paint. In order to achieve that, you have to learn the basic languages...different languages or vocabularies. In the West of course, when you are doing sketches, you are fumbling in the dark, you are trying to invent your own painting technique. Of course there are schema you can learn, but in the very beginning you are allowed to do something on your own. But in Chinese painting, you learn like Chinese calligraphers learn—you can't make up the characters on your own. You learn the basic strokes before you can go on to do your own. And this is the reason why, when the Chinese painting language matured in the Northern Song Dynasty, the elementary painting manual or dictionary is invented...in the very beginning it is very limited: how to paint a pine tree, or how to paint a chrysanthemum, or orchid. Because the pine tree is the symbol of a Confucian gentleman, because a pine tree can stand in the hard weather, against ice and snow, just like a gentleman can survive in a very difficult time.

And the chrysanthemum, it carries the same connotation. All these plants are symbolic. It's not like artists walking to the botanical gardens and treating all plants equally—you paint certain plants with a cultural reference. With a cultural reference or character. This is the reason why a Chinese painter never sees a forest as a forest: he will single out the important trees, like pine trees or bamboo. The rest of the trees are miscellaneous trees—they aren't important; they serve as a backdrop.

In the West, in the Catholic tradition, you would probably paint a rose, because it is a symbol for love, and the Madonna, and grace, and so on...but in China, *all* subjects are carefully selected for their cultural reference—just like the peony flower is not just a flower, it is also a symbol of good

fortunes, of getting a promotion. And then if you paint a cat, it's not because you love the cat. The pronunciation of cat is just like the pronunciation of the word for '17 years old.' And so you paint a cat: the cat must watch a butterfly, because the cat and the butterfly together mean a celebration of 17th birthday, or of longevity. If you present a cat painting to someone, it is definitely a wish for them to experience longevity.

You have probably seen Chinese painters painting fish. It is always 9 fish, never 6, because the word that means 9 is pronounced like 'a long time', and fish means 'left over', you have a surplus, and so it carries auspicious meaning. And so painters don't paint just anything that runs in front of him, like a reporter. No, no. All the subjects are carefully selected with a cultural reference.

### **Could you tell us something about the use of the panda in your painting?**

**Lo:** Yes, and this is one of my convictions. Of course, for landscape, I want to use this new landscape. I want to continue in the tradition but also to re-invent it, to show that this new landscape is the portrait of a new age. And then for animal paintings, again, you know, animal paintings is a long tradition in the Tang Dynasty. In the Tang Dynasty, people and officials and royal families loved the horse. At that time, you know, the horse is not only a symbol like ... the modern Mercedes Benz, but also a symbol of gallantry, of enterprising spirit. And also, the horse carries connotations of reaching success, of winning in the battlefield. So in the Tang Dynasty, we begin to see painters specialized in painting horses. They painted nothing but horses. They became famous. In the past, this had been impossible, because you had to paint everything, not just specialized things, but in the Tang Dynasty you begin to have painters like this.

During the Song Dynasty, the monkey also enjoyed great popularity. The word monkey, he pronunciation of the word monkey, also means karma, or chances, or an outcome. So when you paint a monkey, it means, like...for example, when we meet on the air, on Skype, we can say, 'oh, we have good monkey'...'this is a monkey occasion'...the pronunciation of 'monkey' and 'karma' is the same. Painters began to put monkeys and horses together, because the pronunciation of 'horse' can mean 'immediately', and the pronunciation of monkey can mean 'duke' or 'marquis'. So if you put horse and monkey together, it means that you want someone to get a promotion in the near future. And the examples continue, including fish, cats, and butterflies. Of course these animals acquired not only cultural significance, but also symbolic significance, usually associated with good luck and success.

So, when you get to the 20th century, for the first time, the panda appeared into our world. And we realized that...you know, the panda is actually recorded for the very first time very early, in Chinese books that mention the panda as a symbol for peace or truth. So in ancient times, when two armies were clashing in war, and you wanted to propose a truce, you used a flag with a panda on it. But this is later forgotten. But the symbol of panda as a symbol for peace, it's still there. And later in the 20th century, the panda is used by Communist China as a kind of ambassador, for political or economic or cultural, or other purposes. And this made me realize that the situation of the panda is very much—as this endangered species, on the edge of extinction— like the Confucian gentleman. Because in the 20th century the Confucian scholar or gentleman becomes a joke, because he becomes a joke in modern society, he can't survive. And then I noticed that the panda, although it has a mating season, usually stays by itself almost year round, eating bamboo. Bamboo is a very typical symbol of the Chinese Confucian gentleman, because pine trees and bamboo are very different kinds of plants, but they both stay evergreen in the snow.

So I think that it is probably time for me to add the panda into this animal tradition, but adding something: panda is not only a symbol for peace, there's also a kind of Confucian spirit there. Of course, the panda is also a symbol for environmental conservation, which moves away from this idea of prosperity and good wishes kind of thing and towards a more contemporary positive way of thinking and saving the environment. And so I use the panda, dramatize it, asking the panda to impersonate some human characters, like the Buddhist monk or Confucian scholar or ecologist or biologist, like that. And so the panda, in my painting, performs all kinds of activities, to symbolize or present a new world and new intellectual activities in the 20th or 21st centuries.

### **Could you say something about your paintings of rocks?**

**Lo:** Oh yes, the rock. Well, again, Chinese painting is kind of self-sufficient starting all the way from the Early Han Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty, Chinese painters were never challenged by the outside world. During the Qianlong period, Jesuit priests like Castiglione tried to introduce Europeans techniques like chiaroscuro and sfumato into Chinese painting. Chinese art critics said that, well, if you aim for verisimilitude or trying to portray things faithfully, this is just children's stuff, because the purpose of the painting is not only to capture the external reality, but also to capture the inner feelings, or reality, or your inner temperament. So those who are able to portray a flower vase, or a crane, or a sparrow, or a tiger, in a sort of representational way—this is just a low level thing. It's fine, but it's useless as far as they were concerned. These are the kinds of criticisms they would get from the Chinese art critics.

But then in the 20th century, Chinese intellectuals were facing many challenges from Western literature and art. The first thing is of course, when Homer was first introduced into China, this big long thing, then when Chinese poets, or critics, or artists...we don't have epics in the whole history of Chinese literature, so it was like Chinese had to create a big long epic poem to show that we could do that. Of course later, it turns out that this is totally unnecessary. Then later, shortly after WWI, all these young painters went to Paris to study, and some of them bring along very traditional, salon-painting types of ideas, neo-classicism. But some of them bring along abstract painting. And of course, some Chinese painters are interested by Jackson Pollock, or the Greenberg theory, and think that abstract painting is the only thing, that we should move to a more 'advanced' state: abstract painting. But you know, come to think of it, in China, we developed, in the very early stage, this appreciation of rocks. In the Song Dynasty there are rules, or principles, that guide you in how to appreciate rocks. The first principle is that those rocks that resemble concrete images are no good. You know, for the beginners, people collect rocks and are like, 'oh this rock is like a tiger or a snake or a fish or a sparrow or a cricket, so it's a wonderful rock'. But the Sung connoisseurs immediately realized that the rock should be appreciated on its own merits. The rock must be half-transparent or seen through, all these abstract qualities. A rock should resemble nothing but a rock. Of course, what can you expect, this is a purely abstract thing. A rock should be respected and appreciated as it is...but then, there's a famous story, and later this story or anecdote becomes a very famous theme in Chinese painting. a famous high official a calligrapher, poet, and painter in the Northern Song Dynasty...One day he passed a forest and then he noticed a rock among the woods, and immediately he hurried to the rock and called it 'my brother.' 'Finally after all these years I have found you here.' And so he ordered his subjects to give it a bath and new clothes and he arranged incense for it, and trying to, you know, performing a ceremony, bowing and prostrating himself in front of the rock, regarding the rock not only as his brother but also his spiritual friend.

And then later, you see paintings of men prostrating before a rock, and after that rock painting becomes very popular. But in Chinese mythology, the ancient mythologists say that heaven and earth are somehow incomplete, that there is a goddess who tried to select the fallen rocks from the sky and tried to mend the sky with this 'rock of five colors' or 'rock of multi-colors.' So there are so many stories related to the rock. Finally, the greatest novel of the Qing Dynasty is called the story of the rock. And this reminds me of the story in the West, in the Catholic tradition, where when you first meet an angel, you don't recognize it as an angel, you think, oh, it's a beggar or an old later and only later do you realize what you experienced. In China there are stories like this, where an ordinary rock lays on the side of the road, one that nobody pays any attention to—but later it turns out to have diamonds or precious jade inside. In fact during the Warring States period, before the 4th century BC, there was a man who presented a rock to the king saying 'this is a precious rock', but nobody could see that, and so he was punished. First they cut off his legs, then his arms, then even his eyes. Finally, after 20 years, a new king accepts his offer and tries to find out if it is a precious rock, and the most precious kind of jade is discovered inside the rock.

So the rock for me is a very important subject, because rocks can symbolize a lot of things, and at the same time it can satisfy the need to paint abstractly. You see, the Platonic idea of the Ideal world and then the Real world doesn't work in the Chinese context, but when you introduce the rock, it is something concrete, in our world, but at the same time the rock itself is purely abstract; it will present nothing but itself. If you wanted, you could do a study of rocks painted by Chinese painters in the last 500 years: amazing things would result. But you know, I do these self-portraits with broken rocks; I introduce the new ideas like the meteor or orbits or space, and I try to update the rock tradition in the 20th century world.

**Thank you so much for taking time to answer our questions.**

**Lo:** I hope that my answers will temporarily satisfy you and solve your problems, for the writing of your research.