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CAO JUN

Hymns to Nature



edited by John Sallis
McMullen Museum of Art, Boston College





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This publication is issued in conjunction with the exhibition *Cao Jun: Hymns to Nature* in the Daley Family and Monan Galleries at the McMullen Museum of Art, Boston College, February 5–June 3, 2018. Organized by the McMullen Museum, *Hymns to Nature* has been curated by John Sallis and underwritten by Boston College with major support from the Patrons of the McMullen Museum.

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Back: *Poetry's Evocative Power over Wind and Fog* 诗句成风, 2014, plate 28
Endpapers: *Poetic Water* 如诗之水, 2013, plate 7

All works appear courtesy of Cao Jun and are from his collection. Plates photography by Christopher Soldt (Boston College).

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Preface

In 2013, John Sallis, Boston College's Frederick J. Adelman, SJ Professor of Philosophy, visited Cao Jun at his museum complex in Wuxi, not far from Shanghai. At the time, Sallis, who curated the McMullen's groundbreaking *Paul Klee: Philosophical Vision; From Nature to Art* in 2012, had been focusing on the aesthetics of older classical Chinese landscape painting. He was immediately intrigued by Cao Jun's novel visual solutions that blend techniques from traditional Chinese painting with innovative, modern ones. Sallis was so impressed, that in speaking with Cao Jun, he proposed writing an essay about the artist's paintings. He presented versions of the resulting essay entitled "Hymns to Nature: Cao Jun and the Renewal of Chinese Landscape Painting" over the last several years in Milan, Reykjavik, and Boston. In 2015, when he introduced the McMullen team to Cao Jun's paintings, calligraphy, and porcelain, we responded enthusiastically to his proposal for mounting an exhibition displaying the full range of the artist's work, the first of its kind in the United States.

In the course of preparation for the exhibition, Sallis has expanded his essay for the catalogue and wall texts through additional research and extended interviews with Cao Jun. Indeed, the exhibition's subtitle derives from the artist's statement: "The images on my canvases are the hymns I write to nature." It is to Sallis, who has masterminded this seminal analysis of Cao Jun's work with graciousness and a philosopher's precision, that the Museum owes its greatest debt of gratitude. He selected the works to be displayed in consultation with Diana Larsen, one of the Museum's Assistant Directors. She designed the installation in the Daley Family and Monan Galleries to complement the aesthetic themes presented. Of course, the project could not have been realized without Cao Jun and his wife, Nancy, to whom we extend heartfelt thanks for their kind cooperation and for generous loans from their collection. We also acknowledge Steven Rockefeller Jr. who collaborated with the art-

ist by filming a video to complete one of the works on display (plate 64).

Sallis enlisted an outstanding group of scholars from China and America to offer expertise and contribute essays to this volume, for which he also wrote: Bret W. Davis, Alejandro A. Vallega, Wang Huaiyu, Xia Kejun, and Yang Guang. In addition, Yang Guang translated calligraphy and inscriptions on the paintings, and the other four writers each helped with translations of several titles of the paintings. Kerry Brogan provided invaluable advice and Nancy Fedrow ably assisted in preparing texts and images.

Assistant Director John McCoy designed this book and the exhibition's graphics to accommodate the unusual sizes of Cao Jun's work and to capture his art as hymns to nature. Manager of Publications and Exhibitions Kate Shugert organized loans and copyedited this volume with exceptional perception and attention to detail. Rachel Chamberlain, Manager of Education, Outreach, and Digital Resources, has created a series of public lectures, conferences, workshops, and events to engage audiences of all ages with ideas connected to the artist's work.

Colleagues across Boston College guided essential aspects of the exhibition. Christopher Soldt from Media Technology Services undertook new photography for the book. Anastos Chiavaras and Rose Breen from the Office of Risk Management provided help with insurance. Peter Marino, from the Center for Centers, and the Advancement Office aided with funding. We remain grateful for the following Museum endowments that provide vital support for all our projects: Linda '64 and Adam Crescenzi Fund, Janet M. and C. Michael Daley '58 Fund, Gerard and Jane Gaughan Fund for Exhibitions, Hecksher Family Fund, Hightower Family Fund, John F. McCarthy and Gail M. Bayer Fund, Christopher J. Toomey '78 Fund, and Alison S. and William M. Vareika '74, P'09, '15 Fund.

The McMullen Museum could not have brought this project to fruition without the continued generosity of the administration of Boston College and the McMullen Family Foundation. We especially thank Jacqueline McMullen, President William P. Leahy, SJ; Provost David Quigley; Vice Provost Billy Soo; Morrissey College of Arts and Sciences Dean Gregory Kalscheur, SJ; and Director of the Institute for Liberal Arts Mary Crane. Major support for the exhibition was provided by the Patrons of the McMullen Museum, chaired by C. Michael Daley. To all mentioned above, who made this such a pleasant and productive collaboration, we record our thanks.

Nancy Netzer
Director and Professor of Art History

Introduction

JOHN SALLIS

Cao Jun was born in Jiangyan, Jiangsu Province, China, in 1966. His early environment was shaped by the presence of water, by rivers and lakes of the region. The prominence of water in his art and his preference for lotus as subject matter stem from his early experiences. The warm and moist climate of his native region was ideal for applying water and ink to Xuan paper. Cao Jun's art is deeply rooted in the long tradition of art and literature of southern China, especially in the tradition of water and ink painting.

Cao Jun studied and worked near Mount Tai for eighteen years and during this period developed a keen understanding of mountains, which figure very significantly in many of his paintings. Fascinated with Mount Tai, he became more familiar with it than even the local people. After graduation from college, he worked with the forest service of the Mount Tai area. During this time he drew sketches of many of the 2,200 calligraphic scripts on rocks and tablets from various dynasties; he also sketched many of the masterpieces of painting collected by the Dai Temple Museum. Mount Tai, a heritage of world culture and a paradigm of natural sublimity, was perhaps Cao Jun's most important teacher.

Later Cao Jun studied at the Central Academy of Art in Beijing. Here he received systematic training and had an opportunity to regard his art in a broader context so as to assess his progress and develop his skills. The period of study in Beijing was vital for his development. It allowed him both to expand his artistic outlook and to resolve certain theoretical problems bearing on his art.

Subsequently, Cao Jun gained new perspectives by living in New Zealand and the United States and by traveling throughout Europe. In New Zealand he was able to devote himself entirely to his painting, which came to be highly acclaimed there. His painting *Lotus* (plate 29) was signed by Helen Clark, who at the time was prime minister of New Zealand; his painting *A Light Rain*

Echoing a Poem (plate 10) bears the signature of John Kay, former prime minister of New Zealand. A group of Cao Jun's paintings has been exhibited at the Louvre. And he was the only painter to have a work chosen to travel, along with works by composers, poets, etc., on a spacecraft to the moon and back in 2014.

During the past decade, Cao Jun has visited many of the most important museums in the world in order to study at first hand their masterpieces. This experience has widened his horizon, yet also has made him aware of the differences between Asian art and Western art; his awareness of these differences is, in part, responsible for the unpredictable, diverse styles of his art.

His travel itinerary included the South Pole and the North Pole. He was especially overwhelmed by the tranquility and vastness of the South Polar region. He tells of how, sailing for twenty days across the blue ocean, he was shocked and in a sense "awakened" by the constantly changing colors under the Antarctic sun. Afterward, as a result of this revelation, the overlapping fusion of colors took the place of the detailed depictions characteristic of his early work. Through this transition he entered into an even freer state of mind in creating his art.

Cao Jun studied at a mining college, and there he learned to analyze mineral substances under a microscope and to observe land forms using telemetry and remote sensing. These methods, usually employed to find mineral resources, later became for him a key to open the gate of art. Mixing mineral pigments himself, he used them, in combination with water and ink, for color-splashing and for the production of oil paints. Drawing on the remote sensing he learned during his time in college, along with Google Maps, Cao Jun gradually developed his own perspective on and approach to the observation of nature, which has also been informed by his extensive travels.

From an early age, Cao Jun liked to read, write, and sing. His interest extends to various kinds of music, and quite often he integrates musical elements into his art. The famous composer Tan Dun once wrote about him: "I like Kandinsky's and Cao Jun's paintings because of the musicality of their art. I 'watched' Cao Jun's 'concert' in New York several times. Each time I listened to a new piece of his, I was intensely moved. In the flow and rhythm of colors, I saw sounds, heard colors, and got an intuitive understanding of the structure of a cosmic symphony."

Cao Jun's more recent style, involving bold and unconstrained use of splashed ink or color, evolved from his earlier, realistic style involving minute fine brushwork (*gongbi*). He is an indefatigable worker, engaging in the production of his art more than ten hours each day. When creating his early paintings of lions and tigers in which each hair is distinctly represented, he painted the animals' coats at breakneck speed; he compares such creative activity to the practice of asceticism or to an explosion of accumulated energy. In his early work, Cao Jun used a thin, delicate kind of brush; more recently he often paints with a huge brush that resembles a horse's tail. Sometimes, in a kind of free release, he simply throws the brush away and pours pigments on the canvas or the paper.

In discussing the imperative that the artist enter society at large and in detailing the numerous cultural objects and social practices with which the artist needs to be familiar, Cao Jun offers the example of Mozart. Not even Mozart's musical genius allowed him simply on his own to create his music. Rather, Cao Jun observes, he received sustenance from French fairy tale, fable, Teutonic culture, Italian opera, and Latin culture; and all this "helped to form his artistic character and encouraged the emergence of everlasting Mozart!"¹

¹ This account of Cao Jun's artistic itinerary is based on oral and written reports from him.

The Art of Cao Jun: The Painting of Stone and Its Transformation

XIA KEJUN

As if even the privilege of language could be interrupted by stone.¹

It begins with stone.

The most beautiful imagination of Chinese culture begins with stone. China's "last" great classic novel, *Dream of the Red Chamber*, was actually originally titled *Story of the Stone*. That is because the first chapter, "Land of Illusion," describes a superfluous stone that, because of its ability to commune with the soul, is incarnated as a man named "Baoyu" (meaning "precious jade," an allusion to its stony origins). Even a stone can commune with the soul. This is the absurdity and mystery of the Chinese cultural imagination of life: if even an inanimate stone can take on a living spirit, and furthermore, possess the intimate texture of jade, this is the allure of art. Such imaginings of instantaneous transformation are the root of creativity.

It begins with stone. Chinese culture actually has a myth about the world beginning with stone. After the sky was cracked by the warring gods, the goddess Nuwa created a "five color stone" to mend the heavens. This magical stone was the beginning of the Chinese cultural imagination, and it was used to mend and redeem a deficient world. The stone is at once a supplementary thing, a superficial thing, and an absolutely essential thing. Thus, from simple stone to magical stone, we find the cipher to the creative imagination of Chinese culture. Just as Theodor Adorno held nature as a cipher of the reconciled in *Aesthetic Theory*, perhaps the stone is just a cipher, such a conceptual image that can serve as the core cipher to the Chinese artistic imagination.

It begins with stone. Chinese art always begins with stone, with the naturalness of stone. It faces the hardness and heaviness of stone, and the namelessness of nature, and sets out to bestow it with vivid vitality. The stone has a dual existence, a material existence and a spiritual existence. Art is art in its effecting the constant transformation of the materiality of the stone with its spirituality, the stone transformed into clouds, "stone moving as clouds," transformed into a living entity, one that flows. Did the poet not say, "it is time the stone made an effort to flower?"² For the stone, under ink and brush, to generate the most refined breathing is the beginning of the most basic language of *shan-shui* landscape painting, the short brushstroke, but unlike the Western tradition, which views "stone" as a passive material with inertia, a material to be conquered, in the Chinese tradition, stone is at once an impenetrable object as well as a thing of the chaos awaiting transformation. It is something akin to the "philosopher's stone" of the West, and yet it is different, because the stone in Chinese art is more natural, possessing more of a natural spirit, a spirit that also awaits the artist's constant catalyzation and transformation. It is the avatar of transformation, because its very difficulty is what makes it so effective.

Art that begins with stone is art that aims to awaken and catalyze the inner spirit of the stone, to phantasize it. Thus, the stone can be transformed into a tiger, or the tiger can possess the properties of stone. It can become the peacock, or the incarnation of Manjusri. The brittle stone can be made to take on the softness of the flower, even Buddha-nature, and convey the truths of the world's transformation. This is a quasi-religiosity of art, or aesthetics as

a "replacement" for religion: "religion without religion." But after entering into cross-cultural exchange, the Chinese stone must take on the mass of Western stone sculpture, even its sacred permanence, and after conceptual art, the materiality of stone, its mineral pigments and its nature as stone, must take on radiant new breath and begin to infinitely flow. What kind of art would this be? Perhaps an art of the mountains, an art in which stone blends with clouds, stone becoming cloud and cloud becoming stone, all as in a dream (plate 13).

Beginning with stone, beginning again. This is the transformation of the heart carried out by New York-based Chinese artist Cao Jun. For Cao Jun, to paint stone is not just to create paintings of the stones of his native southern China, to ruminate on the literati traditions of the appreciation of stone, or to reminisce on the false stone scenes of landscape architecture, but to "transform" the stone. To paint is to transform. It begins with stone. It is the beginning of the transformation, the beginning of art, the beginning of the transformation of life.

To begin with stone is to begin a new "thinking image" (*Denkbilder*), like Walter Benjamin's thoughts on the smoky images between semblance and non-semblance in Chinese art,³ and its transformative power, the power of painting and transformation, is the root power of the creative imagination of Chinese culture. Perhaps it will also be a power for cross-cultural transformation. What contemporary significance does such creative transformation have for art itself and for cross-cultural exchange? This is the question Cao Jun's works push us to consider.

1 John Sallis, *Stone* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 116. This article also pays homage to Professor Sallis's thoughts on stone and its theatrical transformation.

2 "Es ist Zeit, daß der Stein sich zu blühen bequemt." Paul Celan, "Corona," in *Nineteen Poems*, trans. Michael Hamburger (Manchester: Carcanet, 2013), 23. The poetry of Celan about stone is an interruption of its very sense, as is also Cao Jun's art, but the latter transforms the affection of tragedy through the becoming of nature.

3 Walter Benjamin, "Chinese Paintings at the Bibliothèque Nationale," in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge: Belknap, 2008), 259.

1. The Involuntary Memory of Nature

To begin with stone begins first with a naturalized form of memory, but this is a combination of voluntary and involuntary memory.⁴

In college, Cao Jun originally studied mining. Perhaps constantly facing the stone in nature, the minerals, and those mineral pigments, are what sparked his dream of becoming an artist. His career took a shift when he graduated from Shandong University of Science and Technology and began painting.

In Chinese culture, stone has always been a simile for nature itself, a direct concretization of nature. The earliest painting revolved around the motif of “patterns of stone and pines.” China’s earliest sculpture and calligraphy arts were stone carvings, such as the brick relief portraiture of the Han dynasty, or the engraved stele calligraphy. Like in Greece, things were carved in stone in a pursuit of permanence and timelessness, to overcome the passage of time and to conquer death. Stone is at once so close, yet so mysterious a thing. This is what led the Chinese literati artists to become so obsessed with stone, to worship it. Song dynasty calligrapher and painter Mi Fu even called a stone his elder brother, and the stone seems to have taken on life. Chinese painted art is not merely carved into stone, it also transforms stone, making the stone to breathe once again, to take on the mass of individual life. The stones in Bada Shanren’s paintings have the feel of individual life, the undulation of living breath, a dialogue with the wild animals. Then there are the false landscape stones in Chinese landscape gardens, which bring the semblance of nature. Even more fascinating, many of the pen names or style names of Chinese artists are connected to stone. If one wishes to paint the mountains and stones well, they must themselves become stone, as with Shi Tao (“stone wave”) and Bada Shanren (“man of the eight great mountains”) in the early Qing dynasty, or Qi Baishi (“white stone”) and Fu Baoshi (“embracer of stones”) in the twentieth century.

French sociologist and philosopher Roger Caillois describes the writings of stones as such:

Speak of naked stones, fascination and glory, where there lies concealed and at the same time revealed a mystery that is slower, vaster and graver than the destiny of an ephemeral species....I sense myself taking on something of the nature of stones. At the same time I bring them closer to mine, thanks to the unsuspected properties I happen to attribute to them in the course of speculations that are now precise, now vague, in which are formed the web of dreams and the chain of knowledge. There fragile, maybe necessary, edifices constantly rear up and crumble. Metaphor supports (or corrupts) syllogism; vision feeds (or misleads) rigour. Between the stone’s stillness and the mind’s effervescence is established a kind of current where for a moment, a memorable one indeed, I find wisdom and comfort. I might almost see the possible germ of an unknown and paradoxical kind of mysticism. Like others it would lead the soul to the silence of half an hour, it would cause it to dissolve in some inhuman immensity. But that abyss would not be divine, it would even be all matter and only matter, active, turbulent matter of lava and fusion, earthquakes, orgasms and great tectonic ordeals; and motionless matter of the longest quietude.⁵

What, then, is the rhythm shared by nature and humanity? Does it consist of a natural rhythm, and the traces left behind by said rhythm? In its aimlessness, nature has left behind traces that are meaningless in and of themselves, but traces that are also beautiful and can project images. Humanity can only consciously create imprints of eternal rhythm in a quest for resonance with the universe. Could those be the landscapes that naturally form on boulders, Zhuangzi’s breath of the great mass? This is an anonymous stone nurtured within the chaos, waiting to be constantly shaped, infinitely pliable. On one hand, it appears to be natural writing, the images of the landscape seen on the face of the rock. This is not the work of man—humanity merely projects some imagined images. Nor is this the work of nature—nature

does not possess goals or aims such as those of the artist. It is not even “purposiveness” (it has no use). The serendipitous texture of nature itself has been bestowed with magical traces of landscape. This is pure, natural chance. In this way, the stone becomes the best example of nature inspiring and revealing itself.

What are the principles encapsulated in nature thus transformed? Nature has involuntarily formed traces on stone that provide rich possibilities for projected human meaning. Is this the action of non-action? Is allowing nature to act the true action? Here, humans are acting, but it is truly nature at work. All human action must appear natural. As Kant said, “Nature, we say, is beautiful if it also looks like art [*zugleich als Kunst aussah*]; and art can be called fine art only if we are conscious that it is art while yet it looks to us like nature.”⁶ This “as if” is precisely the root of the creative imagination of Chinese art (between semblance and dissemblance). Thus, the appearance of stone is a model of the appearance of art itself. But how to make stone to reveal richer meaning, and to constantly transform, combining nature and art? It appears to be art, but is in fact nature. It appears to be nature, but is in fact art. For this, we must unfold fully from the material itself, from the language of form, from the texture of color, and the implications of meaning. This is the work of Cao Jun’s art.

2. Flowing Tones of Gold

It begins with stone.

For Cao Jun, after the exchange between East and West, stone is no longer just a Chinese form of life and image of thought. Now, it must also gain the texture of Western culture, the sculptural sense of mass and the formal language of sculpture, as well as the colors of painting, in order to embody its pliability. How can it be possible to bestow stone with flowing breath as well as the texture and sense of form of Western culture? How can the already-sculpted stone be once again made to take on flowing breath?

4 Involuntary memory, as Walter Benjamin used the term, is a type of compositional method that he attempted to reawaken in discussing the writings of Marcel Proust and related forms of quasi-memory (as in the composition of *Berlin Childhood around 1900*). Chinese culture perhaps better embodies the combination of the two, the combination of nature and technology. For example, the imitation of ancient artists in calligraphy and *shan-shui* landscape painting, which is a voluntary memory, but one that in the end takes us back to nature, where nature touches off involuntary memory and eventually forms into one’s own linguistic style.

5 Roger Caillois, “Extracts from *Stones*,” trans. Jean Burrell, *Diogenes* 52, no. 3 (Aug. 2005): 90, 92.

6 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 174, §45.

How does Cao Jun find a way to dissolve stone? This is the wondrous integration of the form of stones and the tones of gold, the dissolution of the barriers between materials.

On one hand, he extracts large quantities of mineral pigments, particularly mica, golden mica pigments. The artist even grinds these pigments himself, something well within the capabilities of this mining industry graduate. On the other hand, he seeks out pigments in the West that are closer to the fluidity of ink and wash. This is the discovery of water-soluble pigments, the shift from oil paint to acrylic, and on to water-based paints. It is a further joining of water and oil, as well as an internal melding of the textures of China and the West. Meanwhile, it must also compare with the metallic tones of Western art, because the halo behind oil paintings was, in early painting, a marking system for embodying the color of gold. It is a symbol for light, as well as the absoluteness of painting, one infused with the shape of the halo. Cao Jun has long been obsessed with gold materials, from mica to gold leaf, gold powder, and all manner of pigments containing gold. Why gold? This is in order to gain a sense of eternity within the flow of moments. The texture of gold is an experience of eternity. In Chinese painting and calligraphy, the addition of gold powder to ink, and the practice of writing on gold-flecked paper, is at once a symbol of prosperity and good fortune, as well as a sense of the eternal that conquers the passing of time. The painting of the high Tang was dominated by gold and emerald tones, as were the murals of Dunhuang. Such a material transformation, from water to metal, is a transformation of texture, as well as a transformation of the texture of life.

What are the mechanisms of linkage and transformation in the flow from the softness of water to the resplendent sacredness of gold? This is connected to the shifts and movements in the artist's past. The artist told us himself that, when living in New Zealand a couple decades ago, he was astonished by the beautiful colors of the sunlit mountain ranges. He realized for the first time that the infinitely rich forms of the natural mountain rocks in the light of the sun were golden, not white, and seemed almost transparent, like the air. This led him to seek everywhere for a material that could allow him to paint that magical gold color of nature. Sometimes, he would use old scroll paper, because it has no sheen, to convey a backlit sunset scene. He discovered that Ren

Bonian of the Shanghai School seemed to have similar expressions. He experimented with gold paper, but it was not strong enough to convey the rich, natural tones of gold. He later added tempera and heavy color painting, but it still did not seem like enough. He then turned to oil paints, but even then, he would add gold leaf to enhance the texture and infuse it with permanence.

There is another predecessor who can provide inspiration for the painting of gold tones and the expression of the fluidity of gold: Zhang Daqian. Without a doubt, this legendary artist who wandered overseas in the early twentieth century has influenced Cao Jun profoundly, as John Sallis describes in his essay "Hymns to Nature: Cao Jun and the Renewal of Chinese Landscape Painting." It is at once the influence of Buddhist themes and meanings, as well as a continuation of techniques in color and art. It is the splashing of colors in Zhang Daqian's late period blue-green landscape painting. In 1957, after moving to Brazil, Zhang Daqian began creating large color-splash paintings. These were clearly not the ink-splash paintings of Chinese tradition. They were perhaps influenced in some way by Western abstract painting, and had moved toward action painting. He would splash colors over a completed landscape, creating a feel of natural flow, a countenance reminiscent of the flow of clouds. Between the controllable and uncontrollable, moving from "coarse splashing and fine brushwork" and "coarse splashing abstraction" toward "fine splashing and fine brushwork," to a style with both splashed ink and splashed color, there emerges a countenance of the first divisions in the primordial chaos, of infinite turbulence, a sense of Zhuangzi's natural movement of "wandering through the origin of matter." Zhang Daqian used color-splashes to gain a vision of flowing light and the poetry of expanding clouds. The details appear abstract, in a continuation from the gold and green paintings of the Tang dynasty and Dunhuang, but these works also draw from the great freehand ink-splash tradition, while also potentially accepting the freedom of Western action and abstract painting. This practice perhaps even went on to influence Zhao Wuji's oil paintings that layer *shan-shui* and landscape, abstraction and conceptual imagery. Cao Jun is now the carrier of this great pedigree. He has even collected works by Zhang Daqian.

But Cao Jun's color-splash painting is different. Cao Jun, who began such paintings

around the turn of this century, is clearly more self-aware than Zhang Daqian, and more active in pondering Western color-splash artists. This has particularly been the case since he moved to America, where he began an internal dialogue with Jackson Pollock. Cao Jun also lives in Long Island, where Pollock once lived and worked, and has even walked around on the stones at Pollock's old studio as he pondered the roots of his art. What, then, is the main difference? First is the increased richness and diversity of the materials used in his color-splashing. Second is the more conscious absorption of Western abstract painting, without actually moving into abstraction, but instead emphasizing control and form. Third is the eventual shift to oil painting creation, integrating the flow of color-splashing with the rhythms of the cosmos in oil paint. We know that after Pollock, painting faced a conundrum in that it must at once be "brushless" while also being "brushed." Thus, Cao Jun uses two kinds of tools and materials, and establishes distance between himself and Pollock. There is a splashing or dripping technique, in which the temporal flow of the movement of paint across the air enters into the canvas, like traces that bestow the painting with the mass of time, but Cao Jun also adds a writerly aspect to this splashing, and uses a very large Chinese brush in an attempt to create rounded lines. Thus, this is an integration between "brushless" and "brushed."

As Cao Jun has noted himself, his employment of new materials and his splashing techniques follow complex operations that only emerged after repeated experimentation. First, he uses traditional brush and ink alongside modern constructs, repeatedly splashing colors and scattering gold according to his intentions. Then, in certain parts of the painting, he uses broken blotches of ink and color, as well as accumulations of ink and color, to reach the desired effect. He then affixes the painting with an appropriate title. This technique is much richer than Zhang Daqian's.

Cao Jun is carrying out an incredible integration of the properties of water, stone, and fire. His stone has been infused with many different elements: mineral pigments, material qualities, personal character, memory, scenic elements, perceptions, sense of mass, vitality, and sculptural feel, and has thus catalyzed the spiritual aura of stone.

3. The Metamorphosis of Stone

It begins with stone.

Stone is stone, but stone is not stone. Stone is a paradoxical thing, a thing that stands “between semblance and non-semblance.” On one hand, it appears so specific and solid, but on the other, it is constantly mutating, even activating, until in the end, it merges with “emptiness.” Stone is even something made from thin air, a magical object of illusion, of instantaneous transformation. Stone can only be transformed within constant emptiness and change, constant metamorphosis. This is the tale of the metamorphosis of stone. In Cao Jun’s works, we see the long, slow process of the metamorphosis of stone.

Cao Jun later settled in China’s lower Yangtze region, where he became particularly enamored of Taihu stones. He collected many such stones in his studio, and meditated on them as a source of inspiration. When the stone is transformed into the image of Manjusri, it takes on a transcendent aura. Inspired by the constant transformation and change of the Bodhisattva, it has begun its earliest instantaneous transformation.

For instance, in the lotus series (plates 35–39), soft lotus leaves have the texture and rigidity of stone. The lines in the leaves seem to be simulating the contours of stone. Cao Jun has concealed many brush techniques and perceptions of the ancients within, while also adding ultramarine to the ink. In his modeling, he has retained the structure of the lotus leaves, but also added propensities of motion, until the leaves take on the form of stones. The leaves thus have the shapes of stones, but still maintain their inherent loose softness. This preservation of such a paradoxical perception is the living touch unique to Chinese culture, from the interplay between yin and yang, to the paradoxical perception of modernity: extracting eternity from impermanence, as described by Charles Baudelaire.

For example, stone can be transformed into a tiger. Cao Jun’s freehand tiger series (plates 4–6) is also quite unique. We see what appears to be a tiger, but it also has connotations of Buddhism. It appears to be a tiger, but it is

also a sense of Chinese style, a form of will and spirit, an embodiment of determination, a tenacious spirit like that of the tiger or dragon, a feeling of high spirits, the resplendence of a king emerging before the crowd. But all of this comes from nature. It is a presentation of the vitality shared by animals and humans. And its skeleton seems as solid and staid as stone.

Stone can also be transformed into a peacock, or the peacock into stone (plate 44). Any theme from tradition can find new perceptions here. He has returned to the Chinese observational method of “viewing things through things,” even using the paints and chromatic feel of the peacock to paint a peacock. Thus, in Cao Jun’s paintings about stone, we seem to see the lightness of the peacock’s wings, as if stone can itself take flight in all the radiance of the peacock’s feathers.

A further transformation occurs in that stone can also be “like water,” flowing like water. Mineral powders are fused into water-based paints and begin to flow and breathe. The myriad things are all in a state of flow. This is the restoration of elementality.⁷ For Chinese culture, myriad things do not have fixed forms, but are instead composites of yin and yang or the elements (water, fire, earth, and air, or metal, wood, water, fire, and earth). Myriad things can be restored to their elemental state, and further restored to elemental rhythms: water flows, fire leaps, earth quakes, air rumbles, metal seeps. But for the artist’s creations and techniques, there must be, within this elemental restoration, the construction of shapes, as well as the control of brushstrokes, and it all must be bestowed with a flowing rhythm, that resonance of the universe as described by John Sallis.⁸

Thus, the various mountains, stones, and other images Cao Jun has painted can also be “like water.” That is why, when he paints those oil paintings that seem to contain scenes of the universe, the details are like flowing rivers, like air flows, like peacock feathers, all leaping and dancing. For instance, the stones and rivers in *Rainbow-Colored Costumes of Land* (plate 12) are like a cloak woven from rainbows. The name is also a reference to Tang dynasty music. Here, Cao Jun has effected a wonderful transformation of the traditional aesthetic of vivid spiritual resonance.

For Cao Jun, there are not just the shapes of the stones, but also the transformation of colors. This transformation is important: whether it is the splashing of color or ink, it is all in order to enter into a sense of fluidity and breath, but what about when facing the colors of oil painting (in light of the viscosity of oil paint)? Cao Jun has made dynamic use of splashed ink and color, and has deftly added the splashing and stacking of gold, all while constantly maintaining the fluidity of the material. Let us compare Cao Jun’s works to those of Gustav Klimt. The latter used mainly gold tracing and gold leaf, drawing symbolic connotations from theology and mural painting traditions. Cao Jun’s approach is more diverse, natural, and vivid. Could this be a new theology of nature? These color forms in oil are like the bearing of the peacock, constantly leaping, shimmering under changing light.

As the artist has added acrylic paints to these color-splash works, we see a rare freshness and sense of sunlight, while the stacking of similar and dissimilar colors has added to the intensity of the paintings. More importantly, the blank areas and black ink add to the spiritual resonance of the painting. He also coordinates the combinations of colors and ink, the ink making the connections between the colors more natural. The artist sometimes even engages in multiple splashings of ink, after splashing the colors and painting, to give it more uniformity and richer layering.

What kinds of artistic principles stand behind Cao Jun’s artistic transformation? This is the aesthetic of the “dispositif” (*shi*). The “dispositif” of Chinese culture differs from “form,” in that it is more uncertain, and maintains a fluid propensity. It emphasizes a murky beauty, but there are features within, and they do retain their precision and vividness. First is the state of beginning. At the beginning of the painting, this is a layout, a propensity, a nurturing of possibility, a catalyzation. Then, Cao Jun maintains the overarching dispositif as it unfolds, maintains the overall tension, channeling forces into different blocks or planes to form different layouts. Then, but also simultaneously, he constantly maintains the relationship between the details and the whole, especially the rhythm. There can be no dispositif without rhythm. The beauty of the dispositif rests within this ever-present rhythm. The next step is to follow the dispositif. This does not imply

7 John Sallis, “The Elemental Turn,” chap. 5 in *The Return of Nature: On the Beyond of Sense* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 73–80.

8 John Sallis, “The Resonance of Landscape,” chap. 4 in *Senses of Landscape* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2015), 118.

giving up on controlling form. Instead, in a process of what appears to be “letting go,” the artist is actually “holding it together.” That is because “reservation” is part of the “dispositif.” And the artist must also pay attention to the blending effects of ink, color, and water, and make them rich but not chaotic. The last thing is also the beginning, because these elements affect each other. For Chinese painting, there must also be an overall atmosphere. As the artist has consciously realized, “atmosphere” is similar to the concept of “tone” in Western painting. The temperature of the overall color tone is a definitive element, the sentiments of the artist at the time of creation being revealed and emerging in the artwork. The paints used in Chinese painting are all water-soluble, but there is a distinction between plant-based and mineral-based paints, which produce different effects on the scroll paper, and are perceived differently by the viewer, either light or heavy, with different levels of transparency. This provides the possibility for different textures. When an alum solution is applied to the paper, the inks, colors, and transformative effects grow more alluring and mysterious. Additionally, the use of “points” in the color-splash paintings is also very important. They enhance the “dispositif” and the rhythm, and can also “awaken” the painting. The differing sizes and distributions of the points can more effectively create links between the unpainted portions of the painting and the intention of the artist, and the internal progression of the painting. The points can even bestow the unpainted portions with varying levels of emptiness and substance.

For instance, in the work *The Firmament and the Jade-Like Lake* (plate 20), multiple forms of temporality overlap. First is the graphic memory of the ancient *shan-shui* landscape painting. At the lower right are hints of the ancient literati detachment with a small figure and boat. The entire mountain range is rendered in traditional short brushstrokes, and there is an allusion to the immortal mountains, and even overlapping imagery of the four seasons. Second, the entire painting is filled with the golden hues of daybreak or the tones of sunset. Furthermore, the color-splashing is like a veil of clouds over the mountains, filling the scene with a flavor of the mysterious, as if drawing the sunset into the night, or like

a magical realm. This overlapping of multiple temporalities is in order to enter the eternal through the impermanent. The title speaks of both the sky and the landscape, and envelops everything in a jade tone that seems to reflect the sun and the moon. Painting has regained the tone and jade-like texture of ancient times. Cao Jun has long dreamed of using painting to connect people to nature and the cosmos, and this brings us *River of Stars Crossing Time and Space* (plate 48). There is also a large work about Mars, which brings in postmodern imaginings of alien planets in line with Walter Benjamin’s *Ein Kosmos der Ähnlichkeit*.⁹

This quasi-natural theology aims to achieve rhythmic resonance with the universe. If all stone can be brought to life, and any crystalline body can be transformed, then there is nothing that cannot be conquered and set to flow in the universe, formed into the rhythm of breathing. This rhythm is the most important. In discussing Paul Klee in “The Resonance of Landscape,” Sallis points out two paths or means for resonance, one of the land, and one of the sky. He notes:

There are numerous musical elements that Klee discerns in landscape and transposes into the pictorial space of art, not only elements of rhythm but also the shapes and movements that belong to the sounding of music, harmonic patterns, for instance, and polyphony. Along with the resonances that he describes as coming from the earth and the cosmos, he would no doubt grant that there is a resonance evoked by the musicality of a landscape, a resonance that perhaps only the artist can sense and make visible through the lines, tones, and colors of an artwork.¹⁰

Cao Jun differs, though he also has two paths: one of stone, and one of flowing water. One is of shape, the other breath. In the end, however, the two are both at the service of a rhythmic resonance. They both use a splashing fluidity and a sense of motion resembling nature to bring the entire painting into an eternally fluid rhythm. When stones are transformed into clouds and smoke, the breathing and motion of these natural elements have the effect of opening pulsating space (plate 45), of releasing a universal river of melody (see plate 50).

It begins with stone.

To begin with stone is to begin the construction of a field.

Cao Jun had, in the past, entered deep into the study of ecology through the colors of the mountains and seas in the foreign land of New Zealand, and he has drawn much inspiration from technology, such as the visual composition of remote-sensing maps, which we can see in his works. More remarkable, however, is that Cao Jun understands the method of going from large to small in *shan-shui* landscape painting, and makes active use of the ancient compressed gaze. When Cao Jun gazes at stone, he compresses the world into a potted landscape, showing us the shifting of the four seasons and the finite shifts of a tiny world. On the other hand, he also restores it to a landscape scene. Thus, stone is a medium for coexistence between man and nature. Without stone, there would be a missing link between their worlds.

Stone is not just a thing, it is also an element of the construction of a setting. Cao Jun’s exhibition works include more than just a single painting. The exhibition scene contains more than just calligraphy and painting. There is also sculpture and porcelain. For the Chinese artist, painting has always been an element of the life of the literati, a piece, alongside musical instruments, chess, and calligraphy, of a field that makes the literati life. It is a total art. Thus, in this exhibition, there emerges a dispositif-field of scene. The art of China’s ancient literati has always been an allocation and rearrangement of the poetic space of the literati life, a form and field of coexistence with nature. When we enter into the presentation space of Cao Jun’s artworks, we can see that art is a core component of our lives. The stone and its silence transform our will to exist. This is an art of atmospheric nourishment, of bringing life to the connection between man and the universe. The spirited stone opens up an enchorial space.¹¹

Cao Jun’s methods of artistic creation and transformation have shown us a Chinese artist’s transformation from local to foreign, from one’s own traditions to modernity, from the naturalness of material to the field of space,

9 Doris M. Fittler, *“Ein Kosmos der Ähnlichkeit”: Frühe und späte Mimesis bei Walter Benjamin* (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2005).

10 Sallis, “Resonance of Landscape,” 118.

11 Sallis, *Return of Nature*, 2, 58, 78, 119, passim. In this book, Sallis thinks about chora as enchorial space. It would be possible to draw a comparison between *xu* (meaning both “empty” and “substance”) and chora.

a creative transformation of the perceptions of life itself. His works show us how an Eastern artist has set out from the depths of his own tradition, from the “roots” of brush and ink, through constant reorganization and mutation, to arrive at the “uprooted” and freely “flowing” state of modernity, focusing on certain core natural elements, preserving the vitality of their cultural evolution, and using the imagining of “instantaneous transformation,” constantly absorbing alienness or otherness to construct a sense of global connection. His works are not only a model of artistic transformation, but also provide inspiration for cross-cultural exchange.

Poetic Sensibility in the Work of Cao Jun

ALEJANDRO A. VALLEGA

The mirror like water purifying the shining world, icy vase like a clean mirror, green leaves beautiful on their own, the pearl-like fountainhead remains clear by itself.

My purpose of drawing lotus in ink lies exactly in reaching at this kind of spiritual ambience. Painting in freehand style on the newly acquired Xuan paper, I don't care about whether it is delicate or clumsy. My hands and heart are free from hindrance, and it has quaint charm.¹

I sway slightly a white feather fan
Sitting with open shirt in the green forest
I take off my cap and hang it on a stone
jutting out;
The wind in the pines rains needles on my
bare head.²

Preface

Painting. Before and after anything said and conceptualized there is painting: Painting in the sense of poetic experience, of a sensibility one may begin to touch on in remaining with Cao Jun's painting. This is what captivates a painter such as myself, captivates us, and even may spur one to risk a few words. Engaging Cao Jun's work is not merely looking at another show, at another series of images real or abstract. Cao Jun's works require of anyone a letting go and taking a risk, as one dares to suspend and put in question the traditional meaning of vision as the grasping of visible objects and their factual materiality under the objective judgment of the mind's eye. Cao Jun's paintings invite us to give way to ges-

tures that expose one's vision to unexpected dynamic senses, to a distinct poetic sensibility born in and with the becoming of nature. In order to see this one must turn to Cao Jun not by judging him with the supposed "objective eye" and its rational distance. Rather, one must allow oneself to be exposed with the momentum and feeling of his paintings. And this is not a methodological point about moving from Western perspectives to non-Western art: It is a simple point clear to any painter seeking the sense and depth in the work. To see a painting is to risk the "I," as one's certainty and sense of vision (the eye) are put in play each time, as one's body enters the immensity of the painting's lives. In making a painting and/or viewing it, one must "see to feel," and this for the sake of learning to see once again. My aim in these few pages is only to introduce Cao Jun's opening of a distinct poetic sensibility in painting by touching on a few aspects of the aesthetics that underlie his works.

Introduction

In his introduction to the Italian anthology of Chinese lyric poetry, *Liriche cinesi*, Italian poet and Nobel Prize in Literature winner of 1975 Eugenio Montale points out that even an introduction to Chinese culture and poetry such as his must end up being but a drop of water in a vast ocean that dates back to times immemorial.³ Such is also the case with writing on the artwork and thought of Cao Jun. Not only is the Chinese painting tradition millenary and a fundamental part of his work, but Chinese painting and poetry, philosophy, as well as the very sense of Chinese culture,

share their grounding and origin in calligraphy, in the work of ink and brush.⁴ Each poet has his or her distinct calligraphy and through it participates in the tradition. Each painter has also his or her distinct line, sustained by their ink and brushwork, in which they may express their distinct artistic conception, and in doing so carry forth and enrich the tradition. Therefore, the work of Cao Jun cannot be read as mere painting, as a field isolated from poetry, thought, and, ultimately, immemorial culture.⁵ Rather, engaging its sense precisely depends on reading his painting and calligraphy, and experiencing them, through that great task of learning and transformative interpretation we call tradition: That is, Cao Jun's paintings, calligraphy, and other works have as their task to renew the tradition by transforming it in a manner that broadens it and strengthens it. This happens through his very manner of painting, his understanding of what is required of the painter for such a task, and his distinct artistic vision or conception. Moreover, when one speaks of transformation and tradition in Chinese painting one must keep in mind that the heart and the reason for painting is the task of sustaining a distinct engagement and understanding of nature, that is, a co-habiting with/in nature, in which the meaning of the human shines through the momentum and sense of nature as set in/through painting, poetry, as well as other arts.

Sense and Sensibility

To draw mountains and rivers, one must know their natural disposition like woodcutters and fishermen. It is indeed of great

Dedicated to the memory of David Kangas, with whom in our aesthetic dialogue we will still travel a thousand miles: *Meditatio vitae non mortis*.

1 Inscription to *The Mirror like Water Purifying the Shining World* (plate 9). Title by Chen Xizu, poet of the Qing dynasty.

2 Li Po, "In the Mountains on a Summer Day," in *Liriche cinesi (1753 a.C.–1278 d.C.)*, ed. Giorgia Valensin (Turin: Einaudi, 1960), 115. My translation.

3 Eugenio Montale, introduction to Valensin, *Liriche cinesi*, viii.

4 Particularly interesting is the case of a poet like Zhu Yunming in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, who in his transcription of Li Bo's "The Arduous Road to Shu," chooses to use in his calligraphy the gestural loose script known as *kuangcao* ("wild cursive") in order to convey danger and turmoil in the poem. (Li Bo, "The Arduous Road to Shu," in *The Chinese Art Book*, Colin Mackenzie, Keith L. Pratt, Jeffrey Moser, and Katie Hill [New York: Phaidon, 2013], 181.)

5 Cao Jun, "Maintain the Modality, Part II," *Collected Works of Cao Jun*, Nov. 8, 2013, http://www.caojunarts.com/html/encjwj/Art_334.htm. Some translations from the *Collected Works of Cao Jun* have been altered. For a thorough study of the relationship between poetry and painting that complements well this discussion see: Yanfang Tang, "Translating across Cultures: *Yi Jing* and Understanding Chinese Poetry," *Intercultural Communication Studies* 23, no. 1 (2014): 187–202.

importance to read classical works of the ancient scholars, but one should not divorce oneself from reality and simply follow what others have said. 2016.⁶

As Cao Jun insists throughout his writings, the preparation of a painter includes not only technical work; it is nothing but a craft without the education of the heart-mind in the tradition that grounds and also offers the leeway for new creation.⁷ The painter must learn poetry, philosophy, music, the other arts, as well as the foundations of the Chinese cultural tradition.⁸ Moreover, the painter must travel “thousands of miles” in order to gain the experience with life that is required for a single line.⁹ This is in order that in painting he or she becomes able to engage nature in a manner that will ultimately allow for him/her to find articulation and develop his/her own style or artistic conception or characteristic vision.

The engagement of nature distinguishes itself by virtue of the way in which in Chinese thought the human being is in nature, that is, as part of it. Thus engaging nature is not a matter of going out looking for “it.” Painters and poets feel and articulate the specific connection or movement of becoming that is nature and in which one comes to be. One paints in/with nature.¹⁰ The artist or poet does not seek to control nature, a sheer act of hubris that is sheer madness.¹¹ The task of being with nature makes educating one’s sensibility as fundamental as is the learning of technique. For Cao Jun the way to avoid the empty repetition of the tradition is to turn to nature, the source of tradition and new vision.¹²

The turn to nature must occur inseparably and through learning the millenary tradition of Chinese painting. The very ground of painting is the art of ink and brush, that is, the work that one learns with calligraphy, in writing.¹³ Thus painting requires learning calligraphy, and this means the relation of ink and paper (plates 53–57). Absorption, resistance, density, the dissolution, the expansion of the ink, wetting and drying, and primarily the expansion and movement of the ink on various papers are fundamental to writing and thinking, as they are to painting (plates 9–10, 15, 20, 22, 24–25). Just as each poet has his or her own calligraphy, and their brushwork is part and parcel of their writing, each painter must seek his/her line. In short, an accomplished painter is part of the written and conceptual tradition in China.¹⁴

The painter’s work is essentially poetic, rather than mimetic or representational.¹⁵ “Every Chinese painting in any form has to convey the ‘artistic conception,’ which is absolutely immaterial.”¹⁶ While the attentiveness to nature and to the image are essential to Cao Jun, what ultimately needs to be expressed is the painter’s poetic insight. (Four superb examples: *Manjusri* [plate 1], *The Return of the King* [plate 3], *The Mirror like Water Purifying the Shining World* [plate 9], and *Seeking Dream Space* [plate 43].) This means that in Cao Jun’s sense Chinese painting requires a specific modality of painting and seeing. In order to begin to understand Cao Jun’s reach and distinct language and aesthetic sense I will first focus on the very manner of Chinese painting, and then on the way nature and the sense of things appear in his paintings.

Painting¹⁷

Spilled color and golden lotus are my subjects in recent years. Usually, at the beginning I draw with traditional ink technique. Before it has dried, I splash strong colors and water on it and thereby let water, ink, and color infuse into each other as in a dream. Summer months, 2006.¹⁸

Chinese painting is based primarily on ink and brushwork, and more specifically on ink-splashing (plates 10, 13, 29, 35, 39–40). The paper used is rice paper or silk. The paper may be dry, wet, or partially wet. This means that one may already decide certain relations of spacing in determining the wetness of the paper and hence the level of absorption or dissolution of the ink. The various levels of wetness will make for thicker or thinner ink spots. Over the paper one pours the ink, letting it expand and spread (plate 10). This exposure of the ink produces the beginning fields of color and density (plates 4, 10, 13–14, 20, 24, 28–39, 58). This requires immense control and experience on how and to what extent the painter controls the ink in its movement, as well as in terms of the necessary knowledge of modulation with regards to the relation and result in the various ways of meeting of paper and ink. One may think of the contraction of the ink as it dries. These are two points of a large constellation of sensuous attunements, a touch that each painter acquires over time. To the extent that Cao Jun in his writings points out that the best paper for him must be at least twenty years old, given the necessary quality for the kind of masterful control he seeks.¹⁹

6 Inscription to *Cleansing the Mortal Heart in the Clear World* (plate 24).

7 “Heart-mind” refers to the ideogram *xi*, as it appears, for example, in *Cleansing the Mortal Heart [xi] in the Clear World* (plate 24). *Xi* is not only heart, but heart-mind, indicating the inseparability between body, affectivity, and reason.

8 Cao Jun, “Never Create Until Being Qualified for Language,” Collected Works of Cao Jun, Nov. 8, 2013, http://www.caojunarts.com/html/encjwj/Art_325.htm. Cao Jun, “Contemporary Chinese Painting and Stroke,” Collected Works of Cao Jun, Nov. 8, 2013, http://www.caojunarts.com/html/encjwj/Art_320.htm.

9 Cao Jun, “Never Create Until Being Qualified for Language.” Cao Jun, “Set Aside Brush for Thinking,” Collected Works of Cao Jun, Nov. 7, 2013, http://www.caojunarts.com/html/encjwj/Art_310.htm. “Traveling thousands of miles is better than reading thousands of books,” in Cao Jun, “Innovation Should Be the Best Condition for Creation,” Collected Works of Cao Jun, Nov. 4, 2013, http://www.caojunarts.com/html/encjwj/Art_290.htm.

10 “Human is subordinate to landscape...” in Cao Jun, “Maintain the Modality, Part II.” See note 5.

11 “Human being is just a part of nature, how can they dominate nature?” Cao Jun, “To Start with Image,” Collected Works of Cao Jun, Nov. 8, 2013, http://www.caojunarts.com/html/encjwj/Art_324.htm.

12 “Without sketching [from nature], an artist can hardly experience nature profoundly, as a result, that painting may follow the same pattern of ancestors.” Cao Jun, “When Sketching Encounters Calligraphy,” Collected Works of Cao Jun, Nov. 8, 2013, http://www.caojunarts.com/html/encjwj/Art_316.htm.

13 “Yet Chinese painting is the art concerning lines, which are the whole contents of calligraphy.” Cao Jun, “When Sketching Encounters Calligraphy.”

14 Indeed, the experience of brush and ink is gained in the calligraphy exercise. Cao Jun, “Maintain the Modality, Part II.”

15 Cao Jun.

16 Cao Jun, “Standpoint of Color-Splashing,” Collected Works of Cao Jun, Nov. 8, 2013, http://www.caojunarts.com/html/encjwj/Art_321.htm.

17 This section is based on Cao Jun, “The Substance of Ink-Splashing,” Collected Works of Cao Jun, Nov. 7, 2013, http://www.caojunarts.com/html/encjwj/Art_304.htm and “Standpoint of Color-Splashing.”

18 Inscription to *Dream Pool Essays* (plate 11).

19 Cao Jun, “Substance of Ink-Splashing.”

The work that follows ink-splashing involves thick brush technique as well as thin brush detailed work: Among these techniques are *cunfa*, or shade and texture, and *dianfa*, dotting (plates 6, 60, 62–63). Again the materials are traditionally ink and brush, and when pigment (color) is introduced, glue is used that binds ink and pigment.

As already noted, the traditional technique and foundation of Chinese painting is not focused on reproducing nature but in the articulation, through these technical means and sensibility, of the painter's feelings found in his engagement with nature. "The basic source material of Chinese painting creation is sketching from nature that relies on feeling mostly. Without feeling, sketching from nature can merely be a record of objective reality negatively. It's the sketching from nature that endows an artist with creative passion as well as motivation. Feeling can even take the place of sketching, while the opposite is impossible."²⁰ It is this attentiveness to feeling beyond "natural facts" that sustains and is sustained by ink and brushwork and ink-splashing. In both cases the work unfolds with a sense of intensity and density that is ultimately lyrical or at least poetic and not realistic.²¹ The spreading of the ink on the paper, its reception in gradations, the depth and texture in its drying, the exposure of the paper—each is part of a language that must articulate nature through feeling (plates 32–34, 37, 42–52). Each brush-touch and guiding movement in the big brushwork must resonate with the sensibility and heart-mind understanding of the painter-poet-thinker. The thin lines are not ever the same: each line bespeaks sensibility with and in the articulation of nature²² (plates 9, 30–31). As Cao Jun indicates, each painter must find his or her artistic conception and characteristic vision in working the line, until each line tells his or her distinct story.²³ And this will take the most thorough

education in classic works as well the turning to nature. Without this double education the line is empty.

This does not mean, however, that Chinese painting becomes a random process. Rather, this attentiveness and development depend on the education of sensibility (as indicated above), as well as on listening and being with nature.²⁴ This is why for Cao Jun limiting painting to the study and copying of forms and techniques in traditional Chinese painting may become stagnant and painting may lose vitality. One risks foregoing the spurring of nature that leads to creativity.²⁵ As noted in the quote above, creativity is not found in self-enclosed brooding or in abstract ideas. What affords painting its freedom is nature and the feeling found with it. In turning to working from nature one finds the liberating moment in which the tradition may be taken in its deepest sense and also broadened by the artist's new vision in his/her engagement and becoming with nature. To this point must be added that for Cao Jun the aim of painting is freedom to contribute one's vision to the tradition, rather than only remaining with the forms passed down in merely copying the past masters.

A further point in painting takes us to "color-splashing" (plates 7, 11, 15–27). Only once a painter has full control of the work with ink and brush should he or she go on to introduce color. This is for Cao Jun "the most proud language." Because, as he explains, this is the language in which he finds a way to express his own feelings, which is for him "the highest degree of freedom."²⁶

Cao Jun goes on to explain that the task in Chinese painting is to convey the "artistic conception" articulated by the artist, which is completely immaterial.²⁷ This view, influenced

by Chinese philosophy, is almost metaphysical and leads painters to be at a loss as to the character of their task. In response, Cao Jun writes, the artist "should realize that the 'artistic conception' is not rootless, for it has form [structure] and technique."²⁸ In short, the artist's task, his/her responsibility, "is to interpret immaterial 'artistic conception' with material art practice."²⁹ In part this is why Cao Jun insists on the importance of the image and not just the poetic feeling. He takes up this task when painting and specifically in a profound manner with respect to color-splashing.

As he explains, color-splashing has two basic aspects that require the painter's attentiveness: "momentum" and "atmosphere."³⁰ "Momentum" is "static flow," it is the dynamic movement of the painting as a whole, its force and sense as experience in the work (plates 2, 7 [particularly interesting as the image seems to repeat the Chinese character for water, 水], 16, 21, 25, 33–34, 36–37, 47). "Atmosphere" refers to the feeling of the artist as well as to the feeling to be experienced by the viewer. In order to better understand these elements one must follow Cao Jun in his discussion of painting again.

The momentum of the work is first opened by the gestures and pouring in the work of ink and brush, and that arising momentum is then concentrated and strengthened through color-splashing or pouring. The poetic character is evident at this stage if one considers the analogy with the way in which mountains-and-waters and birds-and-flowers paintings concentrate the intensity of the artistic conception by depicting a few mountains, a single river descending, a single flower, in each case the painter seeks a single or few elements that express the whole sentiment and sense of the experience of nature (plates 2–3, 16, 25, 37, 39). In an analogous way, in color-splashing

20 Cao Jun, "Nothing Is More Important Than Feeling," Collected Works of Cao Jun, Nov. 8, 2013, http://www.caojunarts.com/html/encjwj/Art_332.htm. "Sketching from nature should carry with feeling at that moment, and recall the feelings when an artist is prepared to create" (ibid.).

21 A fine example of this is the contemporary work of Cao Fei, *Whose Utopia?* (2006), in Mackenzie, Pratt, Moser, and Hill, *Chinese Art Book*, 239. In this film one sees a number of factory line workers who express their inner feelings through dance and movement in the context of the factory where they work.

22 Cao Jun indicates Bada Shanren as one of his points of reference. Cf. these works with Bada Shanren, *Flowers beside a River* (1697), in Mackenzie, Pratt, Moser, and Hill, *Chinese Art Book*, 185.

23 Cao Jun, "Contemporary Chinese Painting and Stroke" and "Never Create Until Being Qualified for Language."

24 This sensibility involves not just seeing but the training of all the senses. Cao Jun, "Nothing Is More Important Than Feeling."

25 Hence Cao Jun's emphasis on the motto "involve in tradition with the greatest efforts; devoted to creation with the largest daring." Cao Jun, "To Create in Life," Collected Works of Cao Jun, Nov. 8, 2013, http://www.caojunarts.com/html/encjwj/Art_322.htm.

26 Cao Jun, "Standpoint of Color-Splashing."

27 Cao Jun.

28 Cao Jun.

29 Cao Jun.

30 Cao Jun.

or pouring the tension and sense of the artistic conception is condensed through the choices made by the painter with respect to the rush or momentum that drives the painting, allowing for its concentration³¹ (plates 21, 23, 45, 47). Moreover, this concentration involves also the determination of the rhythm of the painting, as each part, form, and line of the work become rhythmic pieces in the dynamic rush that is the painting³² (plates 4–6, 11–12, 33–35, 43). Momentum may refer to the time of the movement, as is the case in mountains-and-waters painting in which one may find a peaceful scene or a brief storm passing swiftly over land and humans. At the same time as the sense of momentum is sustained by each line, color, tone, and part, a rhythm carries through the relation of each detail, which sustains and develops the momentum. The color-splashing in this sense becomes the instance when decisions are made about the size and form of each piece and line, as well as to what must remain and what must be discarded from the image³³ (plates 20, 34, 39).

It is essential to consider then that in painting the artist must remain with a clear sense of his or her feeling, since it is only their artistic conception and their technique that will sustain the decisions made. Moreover, this is a work of attunement with/in nature, since one must not forget that it is in the engagement with nature that the artistic vision arises. At the same time, strength and concentration also depend on the character of the painter. Painting is a question of character because only a balanced and centered character with a sensibility acute to the point of requiring all of the senses, may sustain and withstand the task of drawing the fitting line. This is why in considering the relationship between Chinese painting and the Western tradition of painting with strokes, Cao Jun points out that in order to find one's line it is best to draw inspiration

from the fellow arts, such as calligraphy, literature, and music, along with taking advantage of the stroke in Western painting.³⁴ This last element points ahead to the next section, in that for Cao Jun “Sketching is the form, calligraphy the essence.”³⁵ This raises a question with respect to the very way of composing the image in Chinese painting. But before moving on to composition, I will briefly consider the other element of ink-splashing, “atmosphere.”

Atmosphere refers to mood or emotion.³⁶ Each experience is situated by a certain mood, and it is this mood that is felt by the painter and interpreted as he or she develops a distinct artistic conception. Thus, atmosphere ultimately reveals an artist's emotion.³⁷ In order to further understand the importance of the two aspects of color-splashing, we will look at the way the picture is composed.

Configuring and Gathering

For freehand brushwork [*xieyi*], it is hard to achieve the perfect configuration.³⁸

Like fairies dancing on water, the Hu brush pen [Hu: a famous brand] dances with ink. 2006, early summer. Written upon receiving the old Xuan paper.³⁹

The focal point of Cao Jun's painting, following the tradition of Chinese painting, is not a depiction of nature understood as extended space filled with things and living beings to be accurately depicted. Being with/in nature, the painter's inspiration is nature's movement or inner tension (in the case of a still stone) and the mood or emotion that situates and holds the specific moment or circumstance. This is why form is not as important in Chinese painting as it is in the mainstream of Western paint-

ing. How then is the image composed in a way that is harmonious and proportionate, rather than random and senseless?

As Cao Jun explains, Chinese traditional painting focuses on “romantic artistic charm,” at the heart of which is the poetic momentum and atmosphere we have been discussing.⁴⁰ This particular attentiveness or way of being with nature produces its particular aesthetic or system of artistic standards.⁴¹ When viewed from a Western traditional perspective, given the manner of painting we have just discussed, this way of painting seems to lack any structure, as pouring, line, and markings do not seem to follow an already established order or form, as would be the case, for example, in working first a sketch and then sharpening the forms and proportions until an underpainting is ready to receive color. This misunderstanding of the aesthetic sense in Chinese painting as formless is further complicated when one considers the focus on feeling or emotion in Chinese painting: As a result of these misrepresentations of Chinese painting, often the pervading impression becomes that “structure is too rational for Chinese painting, which should be purely sentimental.”⁴² But how then is structure essential to Chinese painting and its aesthetics, while being different from a painting based on sketching and a given form?⁴³

One central difference between Western and Chinese painting is already in the way the line is understood. While both traditions center about the line, in Chinese painting line is an element that must always continue to be enriched and developed for its own sake.⁴⁴ Chinese painters show their character in part in how they receive the tradition of line painting starting from calligraphy, and how they develop it in the ink and brush and later in their ink- and color-splashing. In contrast, as Cao Jun sees it, the line in the history of Western paint-

31 I am equating here the practice of concentration in painting with the name for poetry in German, *Dichten*, which means in other terms *condensare*. A point Ezra Pound makes in his writings on poetry in *ABC of Reading* (San Francisco: New Directions, 1951), 92.

32 Pound, 1–2.

33 Pound, 2.

34 Cao Jun, “Contemporary Chinese Painting and Stroke.”

35 Cao Jun, “When Sketching Encounters Calligraphy.”

36 Cao Jun, “Standpoint of Color-Splashing.”

37 Cao Jun.

38 Inscription to *Love* (plate 5).

39 Inscription to *A Pond with the Fragrance of Lotus* (plate 31).

40 Cao Jun, “Structure Should Also Be Accentuated in Chinese Painting,” Collected Works of Cao Jun, Nov. 4, 2013, http://www.caojunarts.com/html/encjwj/Art_291.htm.

41 Cao Jun.

42 Cao Jun.

43 One must keep in mind that “form” in Cao Jun's discussion has two related meanings. One, the traditional forms copied without originality. Two, Western forms such as sketching and through the use of line. In both cases, form is insufficient for understanding the gathering and configuration of the artist's artistic conception.

44 Cao Jun, “When Sketching Encounters Calligraphy.”

ing serves for the most part as the boundary between colors and for the delimitation and depiction of the form of figures. This is done as the line becomes a fundamental element of chiaroscuro, or the light and dark contrast that allows for the definition of form and volume.⁴⁵ Ultimately, structure in Chinese painting does not come as form that results from sketching but out of the line-work one learns already from calligraphy, where each single line has its character, density, depth, and movement (plates 9, 33, 37). This line-writing-drawing is not merely a matter of technique, but again, it depends “on the character of the literati”⁴⁶ (traditionally the kind of painters who paint in light of calligraphy, thereby having a freer gestural style).

As a matter of character and artistic conception, the painter may allow inaccuracy with respect to the specific form of the subject being painted. Indeed, as we saw above, whole parts of a scene or of a subject may be neglected, spaces may be left blank as one emphasizes the concentrated aspect that will most directly communicate momentum and feeling. “Being a bit inaccurate about form of the main part is acceptable in Chinese painting,” writes Cao Jun, “while the artistic conception handed down from tradition cannot be lost.”⁴⁷

In Chinese painting one begins from the task of putting in place the structure at every step. “Being an enigmatic issue, putting in place is the stored honey of the artistic soul, gathered on wings of misery and trouble...”⁴⁸ As is the case with calligraphy, at stake in every line is the configuration of the piece. Cao Jun writes: “As far as I am concerned, configuration can play a role in organizing the entire brush-and-ink language, forming a specific artistic conception, in which every element correlates to each other, or be relatively independent, or parallel...structure makes the painting closed and complete. The greater the freehand brushwork is, the more emphasis should be put on structure, as Chinese artists have to break

through the shackles of form and attach great importance to structure”⁴⁹ (plates 43, 45–46).

The task of the artist is then to put each line and mark in place, each pouring and wetting, such that a configuration arises. In this sense each brushwork, gesture, the smallest detail, all belong already to the momentum and atmosphere being configured. And, at the same time, it is the configuration that holds and gathers brush and ink language as well as all other elements. This is how a painting becomes a whole and holds coherently. Attentiveness to structure is key in each touch and gesture. This is why Cao Jun emphasizes that the greater the freedom of the freehand brush, the greater the attentiveness must be to structure.⁵⁰ Not because structure must contain and limit the stroke or determine it ahead of time as an already determined form would. The structure’s function is to be sufficiently strong that the painter will have the fullest and most intensive possible freedom in the stroke: When this freedom occurs, the artistic conception may be carried with the tradition, not in copying the tradition but in making it richer, in making the line richer. In other words, the structure is not the end but the beginning of a fathomless freedom. Hence the final clause in the quoted passage: “Chinese artists have to break through the shackles of form and attach great importance to structure.” The freedom that allows for furthering and enriching the tradition depends on the utmost attentiveness to and accomplishment of structuring.

Xu and Seeing

Ink painting in freehand brushwork is also a practice of cultivating one’s body. The warmth, peace, and quietude in inner heart is like the mood one has when one reads in front of the window in the afternoon and gains insights into all the things in the human world. But with Western abstract painting, it is quite different. It is more like submitting oneself to divinity. Indeed, I used to have tears all over my face all of a sudden

without knowing it. 2015, autumn, New York, the impressions I have gathered after drawing water painting so often recently.⁵¹

For Cao Jun painting is neither figurative (realistic) nor abstract. Rather, as we have seen throughout our discussion, the ultimate goal of Chinese painting is “to convey artistic conception,”⁵² and his painting bears the depth and tranquility of his tradition along with the force one finds in Western abstract painting. Each image functions as a symbol that carries momentum and feeling. In this sense his work still refers us directly and forcefully to Chinese painting, as one finds in his work beautiful images that function as symbols. Images function as symbols because, as we have seen, they convey momentum and atmosphere, and together ultimately the artistic conception. However, the aesthetic sense of painting in the modalities of momentum and atmosphere is not fully engaged unless one enters the ambiguous spacing in painting between “void (*xu* 虛) and solid (*shi* 實) commonly employed by a Chinese painter.”⁵³ Cao Jun writes, “The criterion for assessing whether a painting is good or not lies in the arrangement of *xu* and *shi*, which requires an artist to value the ‘*xu*’ in his painting; to viewers it is ‘vagueness’ actually.”⁵⁴

The image in Chinese painting is not only a symbol. In order for the artist to fully convey the momentum and feeling or mood, he or she must be able to paint that which is not physically present. This does not point to an abstract idea but to the way emptiness is part of presence. At times this emptiness may appear as empty or white space in painting; for example, the background of *Manjusri* (plate 1) is empty, as is the space around the tigers in plates 4 and 5, and the space at the center of plate 30, or on the emptiness that situates the flowers in plates 33–34 and 38. Besides this level of explicit emptiness in painting, *xu* refers to a much more complicated and engaged sense of seeing.⁵⁵ It is in the play of *shi* (the solid) and *xu* (void or emptiness) that the painting finds its ultimate vividness and strength. This is be-

45 Cao Jun.

46 Cao Jun, “Structure Should Also Be Accentuated in Chinese Painting.”

47 Cao Jun.

48 Cao Jun.

49 Cao Jun.

50 Cao Jun.

51 Inscription to *A Way to a High Official Position* (literally: *Finding a Way through Dark Clouds*) (plate 30).

52 Cao Jun, “Image and Symbol,” *Collected Works of Cao Jun*, Nov. 8, 2013, http://www.caojunarts.com/html/encjwj/Art_329.htm.

53 Yanfang Tang, “Translating across Cultures,” 192.

54 Cao Jun, “Value Vagueness in Painting,” *Collected Works of Cao Jun*, Nov. 8, 2013, http://www.caojunarts.com/html/encjwj/Art_328.htm.

55 Cao Jun.

cause the emptiness leaves an openness that can only be settled by the viewer. This is clear, for example, in *Reflections of the Bright Moon on Half the Lake's Surface* (plate 39), where the title and image leave the *xu* as openness, and the image or artistic conception is to be felt, gathered, and ultimately fulfilled by the viewer.⁵⁶ Thus, the master painter, as does the master poet, knows to leave space for the image to be gathered as it is viewed. Such gathering of sense and image requires the affective involvement of each singular viewer. The viewer must be taken up into the painting and come to share in the momentum and mood of the picture. Through this experience not only are image and sense configured, but the viewer comes into the becoming momentum of nature. Thus, the painter does not leave all that is present equally out front.⁵⁷ Rather, *xu*, or vagueness, works in distinct degrees through the handling of each line, brushwork, and color-splashing. While *shi* can be depicted in a conscientious way, *xu* is the outcome of feeling, and therefore it is ultimately indescribable. Cao Jun points out in concluding his article that *xu* is “a kind of artistic state, other than a kind of ability.”⁵⁸ This is why form may be neglected for artistic conception, and this is why structure and configuration take the place of “form” in the coming together of the work. Ultimately, as Cao Jun writes, “‘Vagueness’ does not only supply the visible effect, but also reinforces the mysterious atmosphere of the painting, that is, what we call, ‘to move in and out with wizardly elusiveness.’ The mysterious ambience can never be absent from Chinese painting, as poetic quality derives from the mystery. The combination of poetry and painting should lie in essence rather than form.... Strictly speaking, an artist has to be a poet first, embraced by a poetic feeling.”⁵⁹

The poetic feeling occurs at the level of heart-mind, at a level of sensibility in which mind and body are inseparable and affectivity is elemental to understanding and thinking. In light of this, in closing I wish to venture some reflections on the concrete sensibility I find involved in Cao Jun's painting.

In the works grouped under the title *The Look of Landscape: Mountains and Waters* (plates 15–27) something erupts. The pouring of col-

or in *Endless Rivers and Mountains* (plate 15) opens the mountain to its elemental momentum and force, and inner tension that explodes onto one's eye. Heart-mind and the mountains-and-waters paintings arise in mutual exposure, as the inner tension of the elements of mountains and waters are evident and as simultaneously one's aesthetic stance is taken up into their elemental momentum. This is a moment of no-subjectivity, of openness with nature. The exposure is not merely a revelation of a fact, since textures, fragments, tones, and colors bring one back to one's flesh, heart, and mind (*The Firmament and the Jade-Like Lake*, plate 20). Heart-mind feels the flooding and flowing of water, the liquid body fills, shivers, flows (*Shennongjia Impression*, plate 16). Liquid, flesh, and veins appear as one is inscribed in the pressing drive of nature, of living (*Cleansing the Mortal Heart in the Clear World*, plate 24). In these paintings the invisible becomes physically pressing. In *The Firmament and the Jade-Like Lake*, fragments, shards, dense pouring, disintegration, expose one's body to the earth's depths and to nature's and one's concreteness.⁶⁰ In similar ways the concrete momentum of nature captivates us in the *Botanicals* section (plates 28–39), in which the subtlety of color and form are continuously challenged by a flooding and doubling of tactile spreading colors that go beyond form, while the emptiness around the pouring and ephemeral colors leaves one to fill the void (plates 37, 39). In each instance a single condensed image captures one's body and mind, tattooing poetic sense onto flesh, heart, and mind. The dense physical appeal of works like *Endless Rivers and Mountains* (plate 15) only takes more concrete (growing) force in the series *Dreams of Space* (plates 43–52). Space is neither inside nor outside anything or anyone. The paintings arise in/with the momentum of spatiality becoming. Line, brushwork, ink, water, and color, pouring and wetting, enact nature's movement: The elements of painting not only resonate and perform the momentum and atmosphere of becoming, the elements of painting are elements in/with becoming's dynamic. This originary dynamic poetic level of painting sweeps the visible objective world to bring one into becoming, into the momentum and feeling of existing before subject, object, things, concepts, tools, and materials: being

with nature's becoming-momentum in skin, flesh, blood, veins, muscle, the inflected heart-mind, in that spacing in which eye and mind find new configurations and sense, configurations of visibility and cosmologies in undergoing the visible with painting's poetic sense.

It is at this point of intensified engagement with nature's becoming that Western abstract painting and Cao Jun's works touch, as he finds new vividness and momentum for and in painting, leaving for his fellow artists and the viewer a path open toward a poetic painting tradition and vision not only for today but to come.

56 For example, Han Lei, *Yellow Mountain* (2001) in Mackenzie, Pratt, Moser, and Hill, *Chinese Art Book*, 147. And also the classic by Guo Xi, *Early Spring* (1072) (ibid., 256).

57 Cao Jun, “Value Vagueness in Painting.”

58 Cao Jun.

59 Cao Jun.

60 The inner force of the earth does not appear only as withdrawal but doubles in a monstrous appearing, almost a tautology, neither as mere matter nor as sacred secret.

The Opening of In-between Spaces in Cao Jun's Art

YANG GUANG

In the history of classical Chinese art, the genre of painting (*hua*) is often said to share the same origin as calligraphy and poetry. The intertwining of the pictorial or graphic with the poetic, characteristic of Cao Jun's work, can be traced back in this respect to the long tradition of ink-wash paintings practiced by the Chinese literati who were well educated in poetry, calligraphy, painting, and sometimes music as well. At the edges of a painting, characters are woven into poetic verse, their abstract meaning corresponding with visible color and undulating lines. Consequently, this coexistence of various forms of art creates a poetic atmosphere that permeates and tints distinct elements in the pictorial space opened up by a particular work. As a Chinese American artist who lived in New Zealand for ten years, Cao Jun draws extensively from the rich artistic heritage of Chinese ink-and-wash painting. Also, through his conscious engagement with Western abstract art, his paintings are informed by experimental techniques and attributes of modern art, breaking free, in many respects, from the conventional formula of traditional mountains-and-waters (*shan-shui*) painting, without losing the Chinese philosophical backdrop, especially Taoism. In this way, Cao Jun's art holds a tension of the in-between in open suspense, resonating between realistic Chinese painting, exquisite in fine brushwork (*gongbi*) and more free-style work in freehand brushwork (*xieyi*, literally, writing "sense-intentionality"¹); between detailed representations of animals and flora using brush writing techniques and grand, formless images suggestive of natural and cosmic elements in splashed color; and, between Western perspectivism, dating from the Renaissance, and a non-dimensional spatiality. This text seeks to explore and problematize how Cao Jun navigates these in-between spaces and how these

seemingly incompatible styles and elements are harmoniously blended and juxtaposed in his art.

Recourse to Nature

Cao Jun acquired his skill in calligraphy by studying and imitating the works of the ancients, such as the scripts on Han dynasty tomb tablets. Indeed, for many Chinese artists, studying the work of renowned masters and one's ancestors is a prerequisite for advancement. Cao Jun frequently integrates calligraphic writing styles and techniques into his landscape paintings, especially into the lines. Cao Jun's artistic personality and style have also been significantly shaped by the natural environment he has experienced—he grew up in southern China surrounded by water and studied and worked near Mount Tai for about twenty years. From early on, Cao Jun deliberately combined the traditional skills of brush and ink with his direct and immediate experiences of nature, from which he also drew much inspiration. This can be seen in his favorite themes, which include animals, flora, mountains, and other natural elements. It is also reflected in his fascination with, and reverence for, nature. As he once said in an interview: He knows the height of Mount Tai with his feet, its character with his heart, and its spirit with his own soul. Mount Tai's height and beauty exemplify the sublimity, glory, and lordly majesty of nature (plate 20) and allude to the affective and pneumatic resonance between nature and human beings that is commonly eulogized by Chinese artists and famously elaborated by Guo Xi and Shi Tao.² For them, nature is not an object in opposition to history and the human world, i.e., *Gegen-stand* merely for a theoretical, uninvolved, and motionless gaze. Rather, there is a hidden and yet profound interaction between mountains, water, and the objects and practices of daily life, such as dwell-

ings,³ physical cultivation, and, most importantly, art. Between the mountains and the water there is an open space where nature and human life encounter each other and interact. It is for this reason that it is as important to learn from nature as it is from the old masters and their canonized masterpieces.

Nature, however, is more than a mere source of inspiration for Cao Jun. The relationship of his art with nature goes beyond mimesis or representation, as a superficial understanding of the doctrine, "truth to nature," would demand it. In the Chinese tradition of literature and philosophy, nature (*zi ran*) does not refer to natural things. Rather, it relates to the cosmological and ontological principle of "creation-transformation" (*zao hua*), by virtue of which everything emerges and engenders itself.⁴ In this sense, it could perhaps be linked to Spinoza's *natura naturans* or the Greek *physis* (φύσις) as Heidegger understood it.⁵ To be true to nature, therefore, cannot be equated with a static correspondence with the natural world. Instead of merely imitating nature, art is supposed to emulate *natura naturans* and bring the force of nature into play. The process of creation in a studio involves immersing oneself in the same beauty that is perceived and received in nature, as Cao Jun once wrote. Learning from nature's "creation-transformation," one adapts and adjusts oneself to its ever-changing and yet inconspicuous transformation, and in the present context, letting *zao hua* deploy itself and operate via the brush. Through such an adaptation, an artist is able to establish a freer relationship with tradition and as a result transform (*hua*) the orthodox methods and doctrines handed down into something original and new.⁶

1 François Jullien, *The Great Image Has No Form, or On the Nonobject through Painting*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 225.

2 See e.g., Shi Tao, *Enlightening Remarks on Painting*, trans. Richard E. Strassberg (Pasadena: Pacific Asia Museum, 1989), chap. 5, 67–68.

3 See Guo Xi, *Lin Quan Gao Zhi* [The lofty powers of forests and brooks], ed. Zhou Yuanbin (Jinan: Shandong Pictorial Publishing House, 2016), 16.

4 Jullien, *Great Image Has No Form*, 239.

5 See Martin Heidegger, "On the Essence and Concept of φύσις in Aristotle's *Physics* B, 1," trans. Thomas Sheehan, in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 183–230, here 183–86.

6 On the critical transformation of the ancient tradition, see Shi Tao, *Enlightening Remarks on Painting*, chap. 3, 64–65.

Cao Jun's engagement with nature is innovative and experimental in character and it indicates his ideas on what a painting as such is. In his relatively more realistic animal portraits, which are usually set in the wild (plates 2–3, 6), there is a remarkable bond between the beasts at the forefront and their natural surroundings. The linear structure and outline of the lion or the tiger corresponds with the textures of the grass, trees, and rocks in such a way that the distinct figures in the foreground or center become immersed in the seemingly less well-defined background, without becoming indistinct. The identical or near identical brown and black shades serve to intensify this bond. Moreover, the majesty of the lion in *The Return of the King* (plate 3) also shows the noble side of nature. We can find a similar echo of nature in Cézanne's paintings of Mont-Sainte Victoire, where the houses are painted in the same dark green or brown brushstrokes as the mountain. This can be seen as a step away from the meticulous and exquisite style of representation (*gongbi*) and toward a reduced and freer approach (*xieyi*). An intense and extreme form, namely great *xieyi*, imparts an even stronger sense of movement and freedom that permeates to the miniature depiction of nature. Details, such as the leaves of a tree or the ridges of a mountain, are painted in a more minimalist fashion. Forms, made of swirling lines, are set in motion and energized. The holistic spirit of free-brush style and the continuous flow of *qi* (literally, breath-energy) pervade the meticulous, realistic, representational depiction in such a way that the latter is incorporated into the overall atmosphere and energy space. Images such as *Manjusri* (plate 1) are thereby not merely cast as figures in the foreground, but rather they maintain an invisible and yet enlivened relationship with the entirety of the painting's composition. In this manner, a painting's narrative—if there is any—is embedded into an all-encompassing atmospheric and dynamic space.

The holistic effect also shows itself in a kind of overall rhythmic movement or *qi yun* (literally, breath-resonance) that one can feel vibrating in the brushstrokes, dots, lines, and shapes in Cao Jun's work. It is internal to natural things, but extends to the driving force (*qi*) of cosmic movement in general as well. The propensities (*shi*) and dispositions of animals and other natural things are represented as if the static lines and figurations on the two-dimensional sur-

face of a painting are animated and invigorated. This effect relies on the fluidity of water and ink splashed in mountains-and-waters paintings. In addition, it can bring into play the temporal dimension of art to the extent that the reverberating movements of brush, line, and color here are rhythmic and melodic in a broader sense. On the other hand, the temporal movement of the pervasive flow of the cosmic force is collected and gathered in the dense texture and solidity of the reposing mountains.⁷ A similar balance and harmony between motion and rest can also be found in how the lion in *The Return of the King* (plate 3) is depicted. His majesty lies exactly in how potential movement is collected and tension contained. This should not be conflated with standstill in contrast to movement, for the majestic power of the standing lion contains all potentialities of movement and is, therefore, another form of movement.⁸ Furthermore, its posture of rest or repose embodies a mildness and calmness that does not neutralize the lion's boldness but tinges it with an elegant shade.

The *yi* (literally, sense-intentionality) in traditional Chinese ink painting is something between being and nothingness, semblance and dissemblance; it is therefore unnamable and cannot be directly appropriated. Such indeterminate character is very much akin to abstraction in modern Western art and can thus serve as a link between the two. An image of *yi* (*yi xiang*) is not a representation of an object but of "the momentum that brings it about,"⁹ as the French Sinologist and philosopher François Jullien pointed out. And yet, indeterminate as it is, *yi* can still be objectified and made rigid, thus hindering further transformation (*hua*). If *xieyi* is the free movement originating from the artist's brush, or an expression of subjective freedom, the next step would be to assimilate and sublimate the subjective into a greater freedom. Cao Jun felt the restriction of classical methods, and his move to New Zealand and exposure to an utterly new landscape catalyzed his change of style and a breakthrough in his understanding of color and painting techniques. He began to integrate more oil and mineral pigments into his paintings although he never gave up the unique styles of water and ink painting, such as stippling and wrinkling (*cunfa*: often used to delineate the finer textures of mountains, rocks, and streams). Although watercolor and ink still figure prominently in his work, he began to include strong,

bright colors, such as gold and purple, hues seldom used in traditional Chinese painting. Cao Jun relates this to the strong visual experience he had in Rotorua, a district in New Zealand known for geothermal activity and its geysers. In this regard, Cao Jun's search for new materials and his bold experiments with pigments were not merely formal concerns but inspired by the impact nature had on him.

The Cosmological Dimension

Cao Jun began using splashed color in his oil painting more often after he moved to New Zealand and then later in New York. This is a favored technique of modern Chinese masters who work in ink, such as Zhang Daqian and Liu Haishu. In his unique style, Cao Jun transformed the tradition of splashed ink into splashed color. Reminiscent of Jackson Pollock's drip style, this approach of Cao Jun's twists free of the rigid controls imposed by the classical style of ink painting, ushering in an unpredictability. His experiments with metallic and vegetative pigments and mixed media, and a growing tendency toward abstraction in his art, show his willingness to embrace new techniques and Western aesthetic ideals in a visually striking vein. In keeping with the increasing abstraction, his landscapes featuring, in particular, mountains, clouds, and water, acquired a more primordial, cosmological dimension. The cosmic grandeur displayed in several of Cao Jun's paintings is, to some degree, derived from his personal experiences in nature—his remarkable travel itinerary extends to the North Pole.

This change in Cao Jun's artistic style can be seen and interpreted from several angles. First, this development did not take place in strict chronological order. As far as the subject matter is concerned, motifs like Mount Tai (plate 20) and the lotus continue to be favored, even in his most recent work. However, he now combines these with experimental color; for example, gold phlogopite powder (plate 37), perhaps symbolizing fortune, and purple (plate 28) for elegance. These two bright hues, among others, are in sharp contrast to the classical color tonality of water-ink painting in a seemingly disturbing way. But it is not the mere visual effect that interests Cao Jun here; he mitigates the boldness of these new pigments, sometimes mixed by himself, with

7 On the gathering of landscape to mountains, see John Sallis, *Senses of Landscape* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2015), 36.

8 On rest as a special form of movement, see Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and Daniela Vallega-Neu (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 152, where rest is viewed as "the highest concentration of movedness."

9 Jullien, *Great Image Has No Form*, 230.

other water-based paints. Moreover, the random juxtaposition of color at first sight is mediated and carried by the fluid, rhythmic movement that vibrates about the entire painting. Although it contradicts the mostly monochrome classical ink painting, it does not create confusion and mere chaos. Rather, the dramatic constellation of color is set into motion and then immediately contained by the invisible rhythm of the natural and cosmic forces connecting the artist, color, and the natural world. The conspicuous colors, so to speak, mark the modulation of a musical passage, while the distinct dots dripped using a special technique (*tai dian*) convey a sense of rhythm (plate 22).

The overall structure of Cao Jun's landscapes changed along with the new constellation and tonality of color. Shi Tao's classical division of a painting's surface into foreground, center, and distance or upper and lower still largely applies.¹⁰ However, in a work such as *Genesis* (plate 14), it would be inappropriate to maintain this order based mainly on a human perspective. The seemingly chaotic arrangement of formal elements in *Genesis* is not confusing; rather it offers a space to wander through, like a maze of irregular shapes and rich textures. In this respect, one could argue that the minute details of the *gongbi* style, for example, the lion's face in *National Spirit* (plate 2), have mutated into another kind of complex structure and texture (plate 12), formless and non-figurative and yet all the more elusive and challenging for the viewer. Such complexity goes beyond the classical opposition between the realism of *gongbi* and the minimalism of *xieyi*. In this way, a painting's complexity in terms of color and form reflect and bring into play the profusion, abundance, and above all, the vitality, of the elements of nature. From this aspect, it is no longer relevant whether a work of art resembles reality or not. Rather, Cao Jun is striving for a personal style in terms of the overall arrangement that will impart a sense of unity to the diverse and sometimes contrary composition, such as porosity versus density and transparency versus opacity. As Cao Jun once described it, this unique, personal style is more than his signature; it is his fingerprint.

Another special feature of Cao Jun's recent landscape paintings is the indeterminate fusion of natural elements into a veil-like form or band of dark color. In work such as *Shennongjia Impression* (plate 16), the reference to a physical location as the subject matter is directly contained

in the title. To a certain degree, even the spatial arrangement could correspond to the famous mountain in Hubei Province. But the immediate impression of the landscape has an alienating effect, drawing one's attention to the unusual blue form crossing diagonally in the lower left of the painting. At first sight, it looks like the modern counterpart of mist and fog; its mostly blurred edge and the semi-transparency of the veil-like shapes (plates 17–18), through which one can still see the texture of the brushstrokes depicting mountain ridges underneath, seem to confirm this impression. However, one can easily discern other new features in this group of landscape paintings. First, the effect of the blues and greens in the clouds and mist is somewhat surreal and unusual. The “veil” can perhaps be compared to a hanging velarium over the landscape. It blocks the line of sight and obscures the mountain faces, but it also opens up the sky and the cosmic sphere. The technique of splashing is carried out so powerfully and swiftly that it sometimes leaves behind sharp edges and dense textures, making it more like part of the solid mountain than the floating clouds. In some cases (plates 20–21), the “veil” appears to be interwoven with the texture of the mountains so that it is hard to still associate it with the clouds obscuring and circling the mountains—the bluish form has even grown and seeped into the mountain depths. In some cases, it evokes the image of lava and magma flowing from a volcano. Just as magma is a semi-fluid, the “veil” alludes to a mixture of natural elements—air, wind, fog, water, and earth. The mysterious veil thus becomes a symbol of the mystery of nature.

Nevertheless, the underlying dynamics of this group of paintings (called *The Look of Landscape* in this catalogue, plates 12–27) is still the flowing movement shown in the fluid pigment and water. It is well known that water is an ontologically important concept and the most fundamental force in the cosmos and nature in Taoism. In traditional mountains-and-waters paintings, water is not only significant in terms of the painted subject matter, such as streams, lakes, and the sea, but it is also a driving force bringing motion and vitality to the otherwise static constellation of geometrical figures on a painting's two-dimensional surface. This is most vivid in *Poetic Water* (plate 7), clearly a poem in tribute to the element of water. Cao Jun's familiarity with the use of water in water-ink painting and calligraphy can also be seen in his skillful handling of watery paints in oil paintings. An ex-

pert in producing and mixing pigments, Cao Jun knows that the effect of color varies drastically according to the amount of water used with the pigment. And yet, he does not try to completely control it, strictly speaking, an impossible venture. Applying color to a canvas or on paper is an unpredictable process; the artist's brush must learn to allow the watery pigment to spread and unfold on its own. So the real skill in handling pigments is in precisely learning how not to control it artificially or with force, but that should not to be confused with total arbitrariness. The free flow of paint and water once a color is splashed on a canvas is similar to the process of dyeing a piece of cloth, and is the result both of a learned skill and the uncontrollable force of the colors themselves interacting with the cloth. Renowned artists, such as Zhang Daqian and Huang Binhong, have made extensive use of the special technique of washing and spreading color (*ran*). Their artistic approach, employing a gradual change in the color density and an inconspicuous transition from clarity to vagueness, though seemingly uncontrolled, is not purely accidental and carries their signatures. The blurred effect is not a product of chaos, but rather the superb skill and daily practice of the artists.

With regards to the creation-transformation of *zao hua* and the subjective freedom of the artist in the style of *xieyi* discussed above, we can describe the tension between control and accident as a transformation of the subjective freedom into a sort of non-subjective freedom at a larger and more open scale. Such freedom goes beyond subjective autonomy in the Kantian sense and remains open to chance and unpredictability. It can follow and adapt to the mutations of the universe and natural elements in both the temporal and spatial senses and then appropriate the cosmological dimension of the world into the artistic creation.

A New Spacing

The intrusion of the dark “veil” disturbs to a certain degree the layout of land, water, fog, and mountains in a traditional landscape painting. However, the spatial depth of a mountains-and-waters painting, characterized as three kinds of “expanse” or “distance” (*yuan*) by Guo Xi, is still maintained to a large extent. In classical Western art, light is reflected on color, and color, in turn, shines out light. The nuanced shading brings about a plastic effect and a solidity and depth. The importance of light in re-

10 See Shi Tao, *Enlightening Remarks on Painting*, chap. 10, 77.

lation to that which is depicted is also typified by impressionism, although in a very innovative way. In Chinese mountains-and-waters painting, on the contrary, the usage of color is somehow independent of light. Accordingly, a landscape's expanse is measured by means of the delineation of movement in lines and not through a contrast in color. In paintings such as *Shennongjia Impression* (plate 16), except for the dark bluish "veil," spatial depth is mostly evoked by the linear texture of the mountains, although the subtle change in tonality in the near monochrome golden color also contributes to the effect of depth in this imaginative space. Notably, here and there are empty spaces and gaps between mountains or between a mountain and a body of water and more generally, *between* the earth and the sky. The permeable nature of watery paints, lighter and more fluid than oil pigments, intensifies the spatial effect of porosity and openness. Such in-between space is actually a scene of nature, and accordingly, objects and elements in nature are portrayed on the surface of a work of art as components of such a scene.

Further to the discussion of spatiality in Cao Jun's unique landscape painting comes another series of works, entitled *Dreams of Space* (plates 43–52). In this series, which explicitly thematizes space, the relatively clear distinction between a scene or an open space and objects of nature seen in previous paintings seems to give way to a more primordial spatiality. John Sallis, perhaps, would call it enchorial spacing.¹¹ What first springs into view, confronted with the ensemble of colors, is the absence of a specific subject matter—the titles refer mostly to time, space, and nature, rendering them more abstract. But if we gaze at the seemingly formless bands of color, with no presuppositions, and if we are patient enough, the abstract and free flow of pigment will form a sort of concreteness of its own. Although, as a whole, a painting is not a depiction of a physical location, nonetheless, the rich detail provides intimations of elemental nature with fine and yet unnamable textures, such as the "wrinkles" and folds of a mountain, parts of waves, ripples on water, and the "veins" of living vegetation (plates 44, 47). However, the intimation is very elusive and cannot be pinpointed as a direct reference. It is similar to the grand image

of the fundamental *Tao* (Way) that, according to Lao Zi's description, is "impalpable" and "incommensurable"; therefore, one can find in its vague and indistinct appearance only intimations of latent forms and entities.¹² The fact that one cannot definitively assign a particular band of color to an object or a fixed form reminds us of the incipient state of the universe as described by Timaeus in Plato's dialogue, *Timaeus*. Before the universe became ordered, the fundamental elements of fire, water, earth, and air possessed only "certain traces of what they are now"¹³ in the image-forming matrix or *chora* (χώρα). In the present context, we may readily associate red and brown in several paintings in this series with the geological elements of magma and earth that are still not clearly distinguishable from other elements. In some instances, different elements are intentionally confounded and intermingled with each other, such as the solid mountain and liquid water, once opposites (plate 8). From the perspectives of the Taoist conception of the elusive Tao and Plato's cosmology from *Timaeus*, Cao Jun's series of space can be taken as an attempt to depict the cosmological image of Tao.

A sense of dreamy space is evoked by the irregularly flowing movement of color, as the title of one painting suggests (plate 43). This primordial form of spatiality is no longer strictly constructed according to the rules of perspective to create the illusion of a three-dimensional space. However, this is not to say that Cao Jun does not use perspective at all. He employs subtle brushwork to create the dimension of depth and brings into play a certain perspective. But it is another kind of perspective that is not subject-oriented or linearly constructed with a vanishing point. Instead, the viewer must relinquish his vantage point and "wander" the traces left by the centrifugal and diffusing motion of the swirling lines. It is in the undulating vibration of the lines and fluid color that the viewer and the viewed meet. In this series of paintings, a bird's-eye view is very often taken as if the viewer is observing a natural scene from above. For example, a volcano erupting (plate 49) is viewed from an airplane. This aerial perspective is more natural, serving to twist free of the geometrically ordered space and providing an immediate visual experience with the natural space. This approach can be seen as paying hom-

age to the artist Zhang Daqian, who, in his later years, created large-scale masterpieces, also using a bird's-eye view. This enabled Master Zhang to develop a grand narrative about Mount Lu or the Yangtze River by gathering diverse perspectives spatially and temporally into a single work. We can still discern signs of Guo Xi's three kinds of distance in some of the paintings in this space series, but they intersect with each other in such a way that sometimes one of the distances in the landscape, for example, the "lofty distance"¹⁴ (plate 47), stands out and dominates the surface of the painting. As a result, the classical spatial arrangement in this painting is greatly twisted and there is an overwhelming effect of free color constellations as if they were poured from above.

In keeping with this transformed sense of space, the meaning of dimension has also been changed. The dimension of depth is now less a result of geometrical construction than an unfathomable and opaque depth of natural elements themselves. Certainly, hints at an illusive three-dimensionality are occasionally made. In this regard, we are once again confronted with a hovering suspense; that is the interplay between strictly three-dimensional space and a non-dimensional and dynamic space. Furthermore, the vastness of the elements and expanse of nature point to a boundlessness and endlessness that transcends dimensional depth and perspectival depth. The blurred figuration creates an overall atmosphere that encompasses distinct brushstrokes and is in line with non-dimensional spatiality.¹⁵ The striking polychromatic deployment of formal components also contributes to this atmospheric effect.

The dynamic and atmospheric space in this series of paintings dedicated to space is also temporal and melodic. This is not only indicated by titles (plates 48, 50) but it is also shown by the continuous flow of watery pigment interrupted on occasion by seemingly ossified dots of other colors. In this sense, Cao Jun's art can be considered an ensemble of colors opening up a pictorial space that resonates with the rhythm and pulse of nature and the universe.¹⁶

11 On Sallis's chorology, see John Sallis, *Chorology: On Beginnings in Plato's "Timaeus"* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 113–23.

12 See Lao Zi, *The Way and Its Power: Lao Tzu's "Tao Te Ching" and Its Place in Chinese Thought*, trans. Arthur Waley (New York: Grove Press, 2016), 159, 170.

13 Plato, *Timaeus*, 53b, trans. Donald J. Zeyl, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 1256.

14 Guo Xi, *Lin Quan Gao Zhi*, 51.

15 On non-dimensional and atmospheric space, see Tonino Griffero, *Atmospheres: Aesthetics of Emotional Spaces*, trans. Sarah de Sanctis (Burlington: Ashgate, 2010), 121–27. On atmospheric perspective in Chinese paintings, see Sallis, *Senses of Landscape*, 131.

16 The writing of this text was sponsored by the Shanghai Pujiang Program.

The Interplay between the Invisible and Visible: Cao Jun's Re-presentation of the Spirit of Chinese Painting

WANG HUAIYU

On August 8, 2003, Cao Jun was invited to take part in a national performing arts festival celebrating Māori culture in New Zealand. During the event, Cao Jun presented a work of calligraphy to the Māori queen, Dame Te Atairangikaahu. On receiving the calligraphy, Dame Te Atairangikaahu asked Cao to take a photograph with her. This struck everyone as an unusual request, considering the Māori taboo against photography. Straightaway, reporters scrambled to take photos of the Māori queen with Cao Jun. After that, Helen Clark, then prime minister of New Zealand, suggested that Cao present another work of calligraphy to the Māori queen as a special gift. As Cao Jun proceeded to present his calligraphy piece, *Pines and Bamboos through the Four Seasons*, Dame Te Atairangikaahu stood up to receive this gift. In view of this unexpected gesture, the dynamics of the festival changed instantaneously. All Māori people started singing and dancing extemporaneously, and the whole atmosphere became increasingly jubilant and harmonious.

Remarkably, this event marked a turning point in Cao Jun's career as his works became more and more recognized in New Zealand afterward. Today, with the extraordinary achievements of his works of art, Cao Jun has extended his fame over the world. Looking back, though, it is still provocative to reflect how the art of Chinese calligraphy, which stands for the highest artistic achievement of ancient Chinese literati scholars, could have been so appealing to both modern Western spectators and indigenous peoples like the Māori at the same time. Offhand, we may identify one common thread connecting the classical Chinese ideal of art and the sensibilities of the native people. This is what the ancient Chinese call the harmonious union of man and nature, of the human

and heaven. In light of David Abram's perceptive account, the essence of indigenous art and ritual boils down to a device to evoke and disseminate harmonious and peaceful temperaments throughout the enveloping cosmos; it is a way of regulating the reciprocal harmony between human communities and ecological surroundings. Accordingly, the purpose of native art and ritual is to promote health, balance, and well-being of each person that is "inseparable from the health and well-being of the enveloping earthly terrain."¹

What is essential to Cao Jun's artistic production is a creative revival of such ancient ideals of harmonious and peaceful temperaments in the background of contemporary societies. Technically, there are striking features of Cao's art such as the use of sterling colors and the emphasis on visual and dramatic effects that were uncommon for traditional Chinese paintings. These features stem from inspirations ranging from the teachings and styles of certain past masters and the stunning primitive landscapes of New Zealand, to the hybrid sound effects of rock-and-roll music. We can attribute the success of Cao Jun, thus, to his creative way of rejuvenating the spirit of Chinese painting that at once preserves its exceptional charisma and transcends its conventional boundaries.

Professor Fan Di'an, the former director of the National Art Museum of China, acclaimed the achievement of Cao Jun as he encapsulates a range of outstanding merits of Cao's painting, the most important of which being his unusual courage and capacity to synthesize such techniques as realistic depiction (*gongbi*) and spontaneous expression (*xieyi*), the theatrical uses of ink and color, and the arts of calligraphy and painting. Such synthesis of technical skills goes hand in hand with a creative way of

presentation that enables the production of art to cross the boundaries of esotericism and exotericism, realism and abstract expressionism, as well as those of tradition and modernity and East and West. In Professor Fan's account, what is most striking in Cao's works of art is his ability to express the sense of liveliness in various traditional themes with "great visual effects." Such effects stem from the immense care and wide horizons of the artist.² Overall, Cao Jun's painting boasts a kind of "grand style" that makes it possible to represent the classical ideal of Chinese painting and its distinctive senses of elegance and poesy with vivid and dramatic manifestations.

No doubt, Professor Fan's assessment of Cao Jun's works of art reveals Cao Jun's commitment and creative approaches to reviving the spirit of Chinese painting and calligraphy in the modern world. However, for those who are not familiar with Chinese art history and tradition, as well as the specific technical orientations associated with Chinese painting and calligraphy, it is crucial to have a basic review of the classical ideal of Chinese painting in the first place.

The Classical Ideal of Chinese Painting

What are the ideal and spirit of classical Chinese painting? For ancient Chinese, such questions regarding ideal and essence may sound too general to admit any determinate answers. As a way of introduction, let me resort to a discourse on painting by a modern Chinese man of letters, Lin Shu (1852–1924). Lin regarded himself as one of the most ardent defenders of the classical ideal of Chinese literature, and he was highly respected as such. Curiously,

¹ David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 236–37.

² See Cao Jun, *Zhongguo Dangdai Mingjia Huaji: Cao Jun* 中國當代名家畫集 曹俊 [A collection of paintings by famous modern Chinese painters: Cao Jun] (Beijing: Beijing Gongyi Meishu Chubanshe, 2011), 1–2.

Lin was also widely celebrated for his riveting translations of a range of Western literatures, despite his ignorance of any Western languages.

In his treatise on painting, Lin first distanced himself from certain ancient definitions that classified painting as a way of natural representation or moral instruction. For Lin, painting is a kind of art. However, in contrast with the instrumental orientations of certain Western arts like mechanical design, the Chinese art of painting is unique in that it is a most wonderful practice for refining feelings and nurturing (elegant and peaceful) mentalities. “On those nice days in the spring or fall, with windows bright and tables clean, one has two to three good friends to boil tea and have heart-to-heart chats together. After that, one presents a couple of ancient paintings and hangs them up, with a view to appraising and commenting on them with the friends. May I ask how many times we can delight in such joys in our lives?”³

Presumably, what Lin relishes and appreciates so much here are the so-called literati paintings, which many have taken to be the most authentic form of Chinese painting. For Lin, the classical ideal of Chinese painting and the classical ideal of Chinese literature complement and coalesce with each other. They are both oriented to the cultivation of noble visions and refined tastes. Hence, literati paintings were distinguished from the works of professional painters, which were often even depreciated as the production of “artisans.” In his treatise on Chinese painting, Yang Xin elaborates this conventional viewpoint nicely as he brings out the important distinction “between the detailed and technically proficient representation of a scene or object and the representation of its objective *and* subjective likeness. The former approach is associated largely with court painters, whose facility with the brush and whose naturalistic style culminated in many fine works, particularly during the Tang (618–907) and Song (960–1279) dynasties; the latter approach is associated largely with the literati-artists whose works started to appear in significant numbers by the early Song.”⁴

Now what Yang describes as “detailed and technical proficient representation” corre-

sponds to the Chinese concept of *gongbi* (工筆)—an elaborate and realistic style characterized by meticulous brushwork. In modern Chinese theories, *gongbi* is set in opposite to *xieyi* (寫意), which is often rendered as the style of “freehand brushwork.” Yang Xin makes out the distinctive feature of *xieyi* or literati painting as the “representation of...objective *and* subjective likeness.” Yang associates rightly the works by literati artists with the style of *xieyi*, or what he defines as “sketching the idea.” This, as Yang elaborates, “more than realistic depiction, is what many critics have considered to be truly important in painting. *Deyi*, ‘getting the idea’ of the image in the artist’s mind, becomes the chief point to grasp when looking at a painting. The viewer has to see beyond the image to the implied meaning. Only by ‘comprehending the idea,’ or *huiyi*, can one appreciate the best paintings in the Chinese art tradition.”⁵

In my view, it is important to note that the meanings of the Chinese character *yi* (意) do not square perfectly with the English word “idea.” Even the most basic meanings of *yi* should include also “will, intention, state of mind, mentality, meaning, deliberation, speculation,” etc. What makes the interpretation and translation of *yi* more complex is the range of extended implications including “mindfulness, consciousness, tastes, amorous feelings, spirit,” etc. Hence, it could be too simplified to equate *xieyi*, which is literally the writing or description/expression of *yi*, with “sketching the idea” or “freehand brushwork.” As I will strive to show below, the ideal of *xieyi* and ancient Chinese literati painting is not the mere representation of “objective and subjective likeness,” but the expression of certain refined vision and cultivated sensibility that are often inspired by one’s spontaneous engagement with scenes and events in the surrounding environment.

For the purpose of this introduction, let us get back to Lin Shu’s discourse on painting and take note of the tragic decline of the classical ideals of literature and painting in modern China. The degeneration of such artistic ideals came with the decline of Chinese culture in face of modern Western invasions and exploitations. Cao Jun, for example, has described the fate of Chinese painting as “miserable.” Such a description, as I understand it, must have reflect-

ed the extraordinary predicament the artist has experienced himself. Apparently, it is very difficult to carry on the spirit of classical Chinese painting under modern economic and political conditions. In contrast with ancient times, very few contemporary Chinese elites are capable of painting anymore and a great percentage of them seems to have little or no knowledge or interest in classical style of painting at all. The social and economic ground nurturing literati painting in the past has already vanished. Most Chinese painters today have to be professional painters, catering to the needs and interests of the commercial art market, which is characterized by a *mélange* of various tastes and requisitions and that conforms increasingly to the sway of modern Western fads and values.

Is it still possible to preserve and promote the classical ideal of Chinese painting under new economic, social, and cultural conditions? Indeed, how to carry on the tradition of classical Chinese painting in the face of modern Western values remains one of the foremost challenges for contemporary Chinese painters. Some painters opted to reject the Chinese tradition totally as they embraced modern Western artistic ideas. Others have taken the approach of innovatively mixing Western and Chinese elements in their productions. Some of Cao Jun’s paintings may strike one as resembling a combination of Western and Chinese ideas. However, in my view, Cao’s works of art are not superficial mixtures of Western and Chinese techniques or elements. Rather, they are committed to exploring and exhibiting the true spirit of Chinese painting and to re-presenting it in a creative way that may appeal to wider groups of spectators today.

The Secret of Ink and the Spirit of Chinese Painting

In order to comprehend the style of Cao Jun’s art and its relation to the classical ideal of Chinese painting, it is best to take a look at some works and words of the artist. Let us begin with the work of calligraphy with the title *The Secret of Ink* (plate 57), which, like three other calligraphy pieces in the exhibition, is presented in the traditional form of “antithetical cou-

3 Lin Shu, “Chunjuezhai Lunhua” 春覺齋論畫 [Discourse on painting at Chunjue chamber], in *Huaxue Jicheng* 畫學集成 [Collected works on painting], ed. Wang Boming and Ren Daobin, vol. 1 (Six Dynasties to Yuan) and vol. 2 (Ming to Qing) (Shijiazhuang: Hebei Meishu Chubanshe, 2002), 2:842–43.

4 Yang Xin, “Approaches to Chinese Painting: Part 1,” in *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*, Yang Xin et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 1.

5 Yang Xin, 2.

plet.” A rough translation of this couplet may be the following:

By reading, I establish extensive friendship
with celebrities in the world;
By traveling, I acquire exclusive understanding
of the secret of ink.

The inscription on the top left side of the couplet makes it clear that these poetic lines were composed and written by Cao Jun in New York City, in fall 2015. What is most interesting about the poetic couplet is the phrase at the end, namely, *the secret of ink*. This work of calligraphy, of course, is a production from ink. The style of Cao Jun’s calligraphy is appealing, demonstrating at once indebtedness to traditional calligraphy masters and a distinctive sense of elegance and liberality that also informs his painting. Broadly speaking, this calligraphy work, along with many other works of calligraphy and painting in the exhibition, are productions illustrating the artist’s mastery of the secret of ink.

But what is this secret of ink that Cao Jun refers to in this couplet? A secret is something invisible. The secret of ink may imply the essential but ineffable know-how in the use of ink to produce works with illuminating significance or magnificent visual effects. Normally, one would expect an artist to comprehend the secret of ink with assiduous training in the technical usage of ink in calligraphy and painting. However, it is curious that in this couplet Cao Jun attributes the mastery of the secret of ink, not to the study of past masters or lessons on painting and calligraphy, but to traveling. How can one acquire an exclusive understanding of the secret of ink through traveling?

We can find a clue to this puzzling statement in the juxtaposition of the two phrases that lead the two poetic lines. They stem from a well-known Chinese saying: “Read ten thousand volumes; travel ten thousand miles,” which may be attributed to an observation of a famous Ming dynasty painter, Dong Qichang (1555–1636). Dong was making a comment on the highest ideal of painting: the realization of “spiritual animation or attunement” through the “sense of liveliness.” For Dong, the capability to produce a painting with a sense of liveliness is what a painter could never learn

through a program of progressive studies. This is so because this is a kind of know-how,

That should have come with birth—a capability that is endowed by heaven naturally. Nonetheless, there is still a way to acquire it through learning: *read ten thousand volumes, travel ten thousand miles*, so that one’s bosom is cleared from mundane turbidities. After that, one would be able to visualize and produce both the hinterland and urban scenes spontaneously.⁶

As Dong Qichang observes, with supreme capability artistic production becomes a *natural* process. It is in this light that we should understand the distinctive Chinese way of painting that is usually described as “spontaneous expression” (*xieyi*)—the expression or description of one’s state of mind (*yi*, i.e., mindfulness, intentionality, idea, state of mind, etc.). *Xieyi* is *not* the sketching of *any* ideas or state of mind that a painter may happen to have. Rather, a painter must cultivate his vision and temperament to such an extent that his observation of things and events would be constantly inspired by his refined and elevated mindfulness, so that whatever he “produces with the freehand brushwork would be able to get across (the truth of) mountains and waters with spiritual liveliness.”⁷

Dong’s observation, of course, was intended for professional painters who should have already comprehended the *technical* aspects of ink and brush usage in artistic productions. Hence, for traditional Chinese painters, there may be two *complementary* approaches to mastering the secret of ink: 1) technical training through the study and imitation of the works by past masters; 2) the cultivation and refinement of one’s vision and temperament through reading and traveling.

Remarkably, the kind of reading as intended by Dong’s saying and Cao Jun’s couplet refers mainly to the classical texts of art and literature. Likewise, the purpose of traveling should have little to do with what we describe today as business or leisure trips. It involves, rather, journeys that would lead a person into authentic experience or spontaneous engagement with mountains and waters, or better, with all kinds of lives and things in the natural

world. In light of ancient Chinese understanding, the experience for such authentic engagement with the surrounding world requires a sagacious capacity, which, though naturally endowed for a few great masters, has to be cultivated gradually for others. Hence, what a student should learn from past masters are not only technical devices, but also, and more importantly, their distinctive vision and perspicacity into the sense of liveliness that is often concealed under commonplace perceptions. In fact, Cao Jun himself had benefited from the works of great Chinese painters like Huang Binhong and Fan Kuan that helped him in acquiring new visions and perspectives into the forces of life contained in Mount Tai, around which Cao stayed and worked for a number of years after college graduation.

Reading and traveling are thus complementary for refining one’s character and promoting authentic engagement with nature. Apparently, not all individuals who have direct experiences of natural beauties, like woodcutters and fishermen, may be capable of expressing and communicating such experiences intellectually. On the other hand, there were also well-educated literati who may be too absorbed in their studies to realize the genuine touch of life in nature. Here, it is conducive to relate a savvy discourse by Fan Kuan, whose *Travelers among Mountains and Streams* has been widely acclaimed as one of the greatest paintings of the Song dynasty. The biography of Fan Kuan in the *Xuanhe Huapu* contains a brief narrative about Fan’s artistic development.⁸ According to this record, Fan enjoyed painting mountains and waters as he studied first the works by Li Cheng. However, Fan soon realized that even the past masters obtained their lessons and inspirations from surrounding things and events. Hence, “instead of learning from the past masters, it is better to learn from things and events; instead of learning from things and events, it is better to learn from the heart and mind.”⁹

Fan Kuan is one of the greatest Chinese masters who has influenced Cao Jun’s painting. Cao observed that he once spent two years studying Fan Kuan’s masterpiece, *Travelers among Mountains and Streams*, by making numerous replicas. Like Fan Kuan, Cao Jun has taken lessons from both the direction of past

6 Dong Qichang, “Huazhi” 畫旨 [The purport of painting], in Wang Boming and Ren Daobin, *Huaxue Jicheng*, 2:213.

7 Dong Qichang, 2:213.

8 *Xuanhe Huapu*, in Wang Boming and Ren Daobin, *Huaxue Jicheng*, 1:517.

9 *Xuanhe Huapu*, 1:517.

masters and inspiration from nature—not only Chinese mountains and waters, but also the stunning landscapes of New Zealand. For both Fan Kuan and Cao Jun, moreover, what unites the technical and spontaneous, the human and natural dimensions of artistic production, is the human heart and mind, the empathetic openness of human sensibilities. It is in this sense that classical Chinese painting is, as Cao Jun summarizes, the painting of and by the heart (*xinhua* 心畫). Accordingly,

Any classical Chinese painting is a complete system containing all the artistic messages about Chinese painting, which is a good alternative to appreciate Chinese culture that can bring about full comprehension of Chinese painting, if efforts are made.¹⁰

What are the artistic messages that Cao Jun takes to be essential for all Chinese paintings and Chinese culture in general? We can find a clue to such messages through the noble vision and refined sensibilities that Lin Shu has identified as the ideal of classical Chinese painting and literature. Moreover, such elevated sensibilities can be viewed as a refinement of the peaceful and harmonious temperaments that are essential for both indigenous arts and rituals and the early Chinese experiences of the unity of the human and heaven. Thus, every classical Chinese painting can be a focus—a center through which the sense of cosmic harmony finds its focal expression and manifestation. Here, however, we should not mistake the *complete system* of Chinese painting with “complete” realization of the ideal of Chinese painting. Because what we call the *spirit* of Chinese painting has little to do with the kind of metaphysical idea or principle in Western philosophy that can only be validated on its absolute universality. In contrast, the spirit in the Chinese understanding corresponds to the way and process of human and cosmic manifestation that can never be fully realized or expressed. In what follows, let us take the cue from Cao Jun’s words and works again and explore further the way and spirit of Chinese painting as represented through the dynamic interplay of *yin* and *yang*, concealment and revelation, the invisible and visible.

The Interplay between the Invisible and Visible

The word *spirit* in Western languages does not have an exact counterpart in the ancient Chinese vocabulary. Rather, there are a number of characters whose connotations all overlap with the complex meanings of “spirit” in one way or another. Insofar as the spirit of painting is concerned, a modest collection of the Chinese characters may include words like *qi* 氣, *yun* 韻, *yi* 意, and *shen* 神. Each of these characters carries a range of complex meanings and implications. The examination of the relationship among these characters and the web of meanings surrounding the Chinese understanding of spirit cannot be done here. Instead, it is germane to follow the clue from the interplay between the invisible and visible to explore the spirit of Chinese painting as represented by Cao Jun’s works of art.

In general, there are three basic dimensions of the “invisible” epitomized in the art of Chinese painting:

The first dimension involves what may be visible from an ordinary perspective but what one cannot see within the frame of a painting. This may include what is left out of the border of a painting or what is covered up and thus deliberately concealed. There are certain aspects of concealment that may look inevitable from a natural perspective, such as proportions of leaves, flowers, stones, water, and mountains that are covered up by other articles in front of them. However, what objects or what parts of an object are covered up in a painting often results from conscious or unconscious artistic arrangement. Hence, they may well reflect the taste and vision of a painter. Even more so are the objects that would be normally visible but are covered up by the extensive spread of colors applied with the technique of drip painting.

For the invisible lying outside the frame of a painting, we can also find many examples in paintings like *Endless Rivers and Mountains* (plate 15), *Endless Green Mountains* (plate 17), *The Autumn Moon Hanging above a Pond* (plate 42), *Looking afar a Thousand Miles* (plate 4), etc. In the last case, we find a tiger depicted in a posture with one paw raised up and its

eyes looking afar. At first look, what is left out appears to be a part of the tail on the right that curves back into the frame of the painting with a curious movement. But there is another matter that is also left out: *what* the tiger is looking at or looking after, namely *what* is lying a thousand miles away on the left side. Thus, what the artist chooses to present within the frame of the painting lies between what is invisible on the left and right sides, respectively. Moreover, just as the invisible part of the tail serves as the pivot for its curious movement, what is invisible in a thousand miles also informs and inspires the overall posture and demeanor of the tiger as a whole. In other words, what is invisible is not simply an object that is excluded from the realm of vision. Rather, the invisible is actively participating in what takes place within the frame of the painting. As a result, what we observe through the painting is a dynamic and harmonious interplay between the invisible and visible.

The second dimension of the invisible includes what one cannot represent directly through a visual image. They are things and experiences, which, though accessible to human senses, are not perceptible with eyes forthrightly. We can find many examples of such invisible items in Cao Jun’s paintings as well: the aroma of the flowers in *Hidden Fragrance* (plate 37) and *A Pond with the Fragrance of Lotus* (plate 31), the feeling or flavor of the season of autumn in *Autumn Reflected in Cloud-Enshrouded Mountains* (plate 40) and *The Pure Autumn* (plate 41), the shining of moonlight in *The Autumn Moon Hanging above a Pond* (plate 42) and *Reflections of the Bright Moon on Half the Lake’s Surface* (plate 39), the sound of music in *The River of Melody* (plate 50), etc.

Paintings like *The River of Melody* remind us of Merleau-Ponty’s well-known theory about synesthetic perception:

For the subject does not tell us merely that he has a sound and a color at the same time: it is the sound itself that he sees, at the place where colors form...*the vision of sounds or the hearing of colors exist as phenomena*. And they are hardly exceptional phenomena. *Synesthetic perception is the rule* and, if we do not notice it, this is because scientific knowledge displaces experience and we have unlearned seeing, hearing, and sensing in general in order

10 Cao Jun, *Tan Yi Wen Ji* 談藝文集 [A collection of essays on art] (Beijing: Renming Meishu Chubanshe, 2008), 116.

to deduce what we ought to see, hear, or sense from our bodily organization and from the world as it is conceived by the physicist.¹¹

In light of Merleau-Ponty's insight, we can say that the painting of sound, as well as other experiences of perception beyond seeing, is another way in which the mutual penetration of the invisible and visible participate in the primordial experience of synesthesia. Here, let us remember that the Chinese character *yun* 韻, which stands for a high ideal for both Chinese painting and poetry, carries the basic meaning of "rhyme, keynote, and tone." What the Chinese describe as the *yun* of a painting has much to do with the patterns of tinges and colors/ink that are comparable to the tone and configuration of a musical/poetic composition. What is orchestrated in Cao Jun's *The River of Melody* is the reciprocal participation and intensification of the visible and the audible. Here, the dynamic interplay of colors, which is modeled after the configuration of musical tones, is used to re-present the dynamic pattern and movement of musical sounds—as if by seeing the melodious flow of a river we were hearing already its rolling songs.

The third dimension of the invisible involves feelings, states of mind, sensibilities, and, more broadly, all states of psyche that are not fully representable through human language or other means of communication, let alone straight visual images. We can find numerous examples of this kind of invisible in Cao Jun's painting: *Love* (plate 5), *Drunk under the Shadow of Flowers* (plate 6), *A Cloud-Enshrouded Mountain Enters into a Dream* (plate 13), *Toasting to the Spring Breeze* (plate 35), *Cleansing the Mortal Heart in the Clear World* (plate 24), etc.

Let us look for example at the painting with the title of *Love* (plate 5). Though we all have the experiences of love, what we experience as love may be so different in nature and kind that it would be very hard, if not impossible, to define what love is, let alone what "true love" is in a language. What is even more difficult may be to portray the feelings of love in a painting. Here, what Cao Jun chooses to portray is a scene of a loving relationship between a tiger cub and its parent. The sense of love is revealed through a range of ingenious configurations: the postures of the parent and cub tigers, the

communication between their heads and eyes, the intimate interaction and interpenetration of their body parts, the affectionate expressions of their eyes, etc. As a result, though the tigers cannot even say a word of love to each other, on viewing the painting, we are able to experience this feeling strongly and vividly. Moreover, this sense of love, though invisible, is the underlying spirit of the whole painting that instills a meaning in all the figures and movements presented therein.

The three dimensions of the invisible above are not independent from one another. Instead, they often belong together in imparting a sense of holistic harmony and spiritual animation to the various elements and structures in a painting. The dynamic interactions of the invisible and visible, of concealment and revelation, are essential for the soul and spirit of Chinese painting. In his witty discourse on Chinese art, Qian Zhongshu offers an enlightening exposition on the original meanings of *yun*, which is an ideal for both Chinese literature and painting. Besides the basic meaning of "rhyme," *yun* carries a spiritual dimension. The *yun* of a poem or painting comes from the *yun* or spirit of human figures depicted, which refers mainly to the elegance of their bearing and demeanor. The spiritual implications of *yun*, therefore, are at once rooted to and surpassing beyond their physical forms. For both poetry and painting, moreover, such senses of elegance and liveliness are extended to the non-human world as well. Indeed, the animated spirits of mountains and waters are analogous to the soul of human figures, just as what is inexpressible in a poem corresponds to what is invisible in a painting. The secret of artistic production, as the late Tang dynasty painter Jing Hao picks out, is to bring out the spirit of life (*yun*) in mountains and waters through the harmonious interplay of the invisible and visible, concealment and revelation. The ideal of poetry and painting, hence, is not realistic representation. It is "to evoke the inexpressible by the unexpressed" so that one may "overhear the understood."¹²

As I see it, Qian's perceptive analysis suggests yet another dimension of the invisible in Chinese painting that corresponds to the inexpressible in Chinese poetry. In essence, what is invisible or inexpressible refers to the inscrutable movement of the Way (*dao*) or the mysterious interaction of the cosmic forces of *yin* and

yang underlying all human and natural appearances. The soul of Chinese paintings and poetry, therefore, is not merely the "truthful" description of certain reality or psychological state, but the revelation of what the Chinese call the "world of intentionality" (*yijing* 意境).

Cao Jun's painting *A Way to a High Official Position* (plate 30) illustrates nicely this world of intentionality and the inexpressible poetical dimension. As Cao Jun marked at the end of his inscription for the painting, he produced it in New York City during the fall of 2015, after he had "recurrently painted with the *xieyi* style with watery ink and obtained good understandings of the art." Here, it is helpful to cite the inscription in full, which contains some very provocative observations on the spirit of Chinese art in contrast with Western paintings.

The art of spontaneous expression [*xieyi* painting] with watery ink is a practice for life nourishment. [On practicing such an art] The heart/temperament [should] be warm, harmonious, peaceful, and fine. It is like the mood one has when browsing a classical text in front of a window in the afternoon. It is also like something that may enable one to savor and understand [the tastes/meanings of] the vicissitudes of life. However, Western paintings are abstract; and [their tastes/orientations are] completely different, comparable to [the experience of] sacrificing the soul for Heaven. [In contrast,] I have had such experiences as when I suddenly had tears all over my face unawares!¹³

For Cao Jun, the spirit of a painting consists in a world of refined intentionality that could only be disclosed when the heart and temperament are "warm, harmonious, peaceful, and fine." The illumination and dissemination of such a serene and blessed mood is also the ideal of classical Chinese literature. It is the heart of Chinese poetic sensibility, which, as Cao Jun asserts, may enable us to savor and understand the meanings of the vicissitudes of life.

In order to understand the poetical sensibility as presented in this painting, it is helpful to note also its subtitle marked on top of the second left banner: *A Pond Manifested Itself at the Moment of Drizzling*. As we look at the painting itself, however, we can observe *no*

11 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 237–38 (emphasis added).

12 Qian Zhongshu, *Guanzhui Bian* 管錐編 [A collection of fragmentary insights], 2nd ed., 5 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1986), 4:1358–59ff.

13 My translation.

portrayal of the drizzle or the water of the pond at all. What occupies the frame of the painting are the layers of leaves of various plants intersecting with one another and a couple of lotus flowers bending toward the right border of the painting. On the left side, there is one big fish swimming to the right with its mouth slightly open and pointing upward. On the top middle, there is another fish swimming to the left, with a part of its body covered up by some leaves and its head slightly dipping down. There are also some petty duckweeds surrounding the path of movement of the two fish.

Though there is no single stroke of brush to portray the water, the pond, or the drizzle, one can feel the tinges of their presence, as well as the gentle breeze that must have accompanied the drizzle, with a sense of vividness. Such is the world of intentionality that is introduced through the dynamic interplay of the leaves, the dancing movement of the lotus flowers, and the bearing and movement of the two fish. In fact, the configuration of all elements in the painting are informed and inspired precisely by the main theme that is not presented, and thus remains invisible: the manifesting of the pond at the moment of drizzling. Indeed, the realization of the process of manifestation, the appreciation for the appearing of certain appearances that remain invisible, must be the wonder of nature and human life that has moved Chinese artists like Cao Jun to tears un-awares.

The revelation of the world of intentionality is evoked through the spontaneous engagement and interaction between the subject and object, emotions and scenes, human and nature. It is in this context that we may understand better what Cao Jun describes as the unity of the human and heaven that is the underlying philosophy for all classical Chinese paintings: “any single piece of classical Chinese painting is virtually a complete system of Chinese painting. It comprehends all artistic messages of Chinese painting.”¹⁴ Now the Chinese experience of the unity of the human and heaven is not anchored upon the universal conformity to a pre-established order of the cosmos or any transcendental ideal or abstract principles as stipulated by Western metaphysics. Instead, what the Chinese intend to regenerate through the art of painting and poetry is the primordial experience of the organic harmony of the cosmos, namely the *sympathy of all things*—the

ecstatic feelings that one is all and all is one, one is in all and all is in one. The priority of classical Chinese painters, therefore, is seldom the depiction of what we see with our physical eyes. Rather, painting (*hua*) is in essence *xinhua*, namely, the painting of or/and by the heart. The purpose of a painting is not to represent the physical presence of an object as it is. Rather, the depiction of certain things and experiences is meant to disclose a focal re-presentation of the primordial experience of the wonder of nature and life that is largely ineffable. The mission of Chinese painting is to evoke and disseminate the poetical sensibility, or better, to open up a world of heart and intentionality so that a path is obtained to the communication of messages that can never be fully articulated with words and writings. It is within this world of heart and intentionality that we can find a path toward the true spirit of Chinese painting and poetry. This spirit of Chinese painting and poetry is none other than what Ku Hung-ming has described as the true spirit of Chinese people. It is the ideal of *imaginative reason* and inexpressible gentleness—“the serene and blessed mood which enables us *to see into the life of things*.”¹⁵

14 Cao Jun, *Zhongguo Dangdai Mingjia Huaji*, 116.

15 Ku Hung-ming, *The Spirit of the Chinese People*, 2nd ed. (Peking: *Peking Daily News*, 1922), 70.

Seeing into the Self in Nature: Awakening through Cao Jun's Painting

BRET W. DAVIS

Manjusri's Gaze back into Oneself

One of the most striking paintings by contemporary Chinese artist Cao Jun is entitled *Manjusri* (plate 1). Manjusri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom whose image adorns Zen (in Chinese, *Chan*) meditation halls across East Asia, is depicted riding a lion right toward the viewer. The image immediately arrested me, gently yet firmly—especially the penetrating eyes of the lion and the more subtly soul-piercing gaze of Manjusri. Arguably both beings, and both sets of eyes, are Manjusri himself. In Buddhism, lions frequently symbolize not only guardians of the Dharma but also bodhisattvas; indeed the Buddha's own enlightening discourses are referred to as “the lion's roar.” The iconography of Manjusri riding a lion could be understood to depict the manner in which spiritual wisdom tames the powerful bodily forces of our animal natures; yet we could also say that this taming is a harnessing of the native powers of our embodied psyches. We might compare the lion depicted here to the ox that gets tamed in *The Ten Oxherding Pictures* of the twelfth-century Chinese Zen master Kuoan Shiyuan, a set of images, verses, and commentary that became hugely influential in Japan. Cao's Manjusri painting would correspond to the sixth of the *Oxherding Pictures* (fig. 1), where individual self and universal Buddha-nature, intellect along with the emotional and volitional energies of the embodied psyche, are so harmoniously attuned to one another that they move as one. Ultimately the oxherd “forgets the ox” and sits alone in the seventh picture, but, insofar as the ox represents the true self, one can imagine an alternative version in which the ox forgets the oxherd and stands alone, perhaps in the natural scene later depicted without—or

rather *as*—the experiencing self in the ninth picture.¹

In Cao's *The Return of the King* (plate 3), we see a lion standing alone, with the full force of its vitality displayed in front of a waterfall. I am reminded of a saying from the Zen tradition

that describes the experience of enlightenment as “like a lion abiding in the mountains.”² The lion has returned home, to its natural environs in which it effortlessly and gracefully manifests its virtue. The lion in Cao's *The Return of the King* mercifully stares off to the side, diverting its overpowering gaze as if to spare us from a direct blow of its penetrating stare. We are perhaps not yet ready for its in-sight, for its seeing into our true natures (Chinese: *xianxing*; Japanese: *kenshō*). Are we ready to return with the king to Nature, to hear the roar of the lion and to pass through Manjusri's Dharma Gate of nonduality into the realm of *buddha-sive-natura*?

Cao's *Manjusri* is not as dynamic, yet also not as sparing as is his *The Return of the King*. Manjusri and the lion that carries him look right at me, right into me, right through me. I have the distinct feeling that they see right through my façades and right into the depths of my soul, as they say. They say that eyes are windows into the soul. Yet in this case, the eyes of this painted image are like a mirror reflecting my gaze right back at me, right back into and through my depths. The gaze of these eyes, which belongs neither to me nor to any external being, pierces right through the bottom of my soul. These silent and unowned eyes stare right through all the stories I tell myself about myself and through all the stories I have been told about my soul. There is no need for Manjusri—the figuration of the wisdom of this penetrating insight—to say anything. All fabrications evaporate in an instant under the cool fire of this serene and silent stare. It is not that I am being objectified by the gaze of another, as Sartre would have it.³ The experience is rather that of a shattering of all objectifications and reifications of the self. It is like the “call of conscience,” which Heidegger says “comes *from* me and yet *from beyond* me and



1. Sekkyakushi (fl. 1400–50), *Oxherding*. Hanging scroll; ink on paper, 53.5 x 29.4 cm (image), Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2015.300.47.

1 For the most philosophically insightful commentary on *The Ten Oxherding Pictures*, see Ueda Shizuteru, *Ueda Shizuteru shū* [Collected writings of Ueda Shizuteru], vol. 6 (Tokyo: Iwanami, 2003); and Shizuteru Ueda, *Wer und was bin ich? Zur Phänomenologie des Selbst im Zen-Buddhismus* (Freiburg: Alber, 2011), chaps. 1, 2, and 10. Also see Yamada Mumon, *Lectures on "The Ten Oxherding Pictures,"* trans. Victor Sōgen Hori (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004).

2 *Zen no goroku* [The recorded sayings of Zen masters], ed. Kajitani Sōnin, Yanagida Seizan, and Tsujimura Kōichi, vol. 16 (Tokyo: Chikuma, 1974), 155.

3 See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Books, 1956), 340–54.



2. Kobayashi Gentoku (1962–), *Bodhidharma*, 2010. Ink on paper, 30.5 x 27.9 cm, private collection.

over me.”⁴ It is like a silent visual reminder to return to the aboriginal freedom and responsibility of what the Zen philosopher Nishitani Keiji speaks of as a “radical subjectivity” that manifests itself through a “self-awakening of the bottom dropping out”⁵—the bottom dropping out, that is, from our fabricated egos and from the rigid distinctions we draw between subject and object, natural ego and supernatural soul, and even my own eyes and those of another.

When Nishitani first picked up a book by his future teacher, Nishida Kitarō, he reportedly “felt as if what [he] was reading had emerged from the recesses of [his] own soul.” He writes: “It is no easy matter for one to be oneself authentically, and it is in fact altogether possible for somebody else to be closer to one than one is to oneself....To meet a teacher in the genuine sense of the word—one who invites you to ascend the mountain path that turns out to be the way that leads you to yourself—is a rare good fortune.”⁶ I too have had the good fortune of such an encounter. It happened more than two decades ago during my initial interview with the abbot of Shōkokujī Rinzai Zen monastery in Kyoto, Tanaka Hōjū Rōshi. I instantly had the feeling that, in a non-specific yet utterly tangible sense, he saw right

through me and knew me better than I knew myself—not the surface details of my thoughts and feelings but rather the depths of my heart-mind. The practice of Zen is a matter of “an investigation into matters of the self” (Japanese: *koji kyūmei*), and I instantly knew that this person could serve as a catalyst for that quest; that I could lie to myself much easier than I could lie to him; that I could hide from myself much easier than I could hide from him; that his piercing eyes, in the interview room, would compel and enable me to drop all pretenses and get down to the serious business of delving into, and speaking and acting out of, the depths of my soul, or Buddha-nature, or Original Face, or whatsoever this something—or rather Nothing—might be called once I learned to see all the way through the bottom of those worn out names. This experience was repeated, each time anew, in countless interviews undertaken with Tanaka Rōshi until his passing a decade later.

To a lesser extent I have this experience every time I see an authentic depiction of Bodhidharma, the legendary figure who is said to have brought the Zen tradition from India to China in the sixth century, whether it is a painting by the eighteenth-century Zen master Hakuin or by a contemporary Zen master. The current abbot of Shōkokujī, Kobayashi Gentoku Rōshi, who gave my Zen meditation group in Baltimore a striking Bodhidharma image (fig. 2), told me that the decisive point, and the last thing he paints, are the dots of the eyes. These eyes must be “living eyes,” for they are responsible for bringing the image to life. When hung in a meditation hall, the living eyes of a Bodhidharma image follow one around the room, back to one’s meditation cushion, and down into the depths of each breath one takes.

Philosophers tell us that the eye cannot see itself. For Wittgenstein, this means that “the subject does not belong to the world: rather, it is a limit of the world,” that is to say, it is the perspectival point *from which* the world is seen.⁷ To be sure, the eye we see in the mirror is a *seen* eye, not the *seeing* eye. It is an objectified eye that is seen, not the subjective

eye that sees. This is a profound, and indeed profoundly Zen, point. The ninth-century Zen master Linji relentlessly admonishes us for restlessly reifying the mind by looking for it outside ourselves: “Turn your own light inward upon yourselves [*zi fan zhao kan*]! A man of old said: ‘Yajñadatta [thought he had] lost his head, but when his seeking mind came to rest, he was at ease.’”⁸ Linji is referring here to a story that appears in the *Śūraṅgama Sūtra*, which tells of a man who fell in love with the image of his face in a mirror, but then became distraught when he found that, without the mirror, he could see the rest of his body but not his head; and so he went madly about seeking his “lost head.”⁹ The lesson is that we paradoxically find ourselves only when we realize that the mind that seeks is not something that can be found, and we realize the folly of seeking the mind with the mind, that is, of trying to see the seeing eye.

And yet, the eyes of a true Zen teacher in the interview room, the eyes of a living Bodhidharma image, and the eyes of Cao’s *Manjusri*, somehow allow us to do the impossible. Somehow, in some sense, and to some extent, we are enabled to see the eyes that are seeing into us. These painted eyes facilitate the “step back that turns the light of the mind back on itself” (Japanese: *ekō henshō no taihō*), as the thirteenth-century Zen master Dōgen puts it in his instructions for meditation.¹⁰ With the artistic aid of this image, one is prodded to attain in a flash *das umgewandte Auge*, to borrow a phrase from Jacob Böhme: “the inverted eye” required to truly know thyself.

Ultimately, we lose ourselves and find ourselves in the event of “seeing into our own nature” (*kenshō*), the enlightening experience that reconnects us with rather than merely liberates us (i.e., cuts us off) from the world. After all, when Linji instructs us to “Turn your own light inward upon yourselves” in order to awaken to one’s own mind, he is not talking about the forms of thinking and feeling and willing that take place in an internal subjective mind cut off from the objective forms of an external world. Rather, it turns out: “Mind is with-

4 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 320.

5 Nishitani Keiji, *Kongen-teki shutaisei no tetsugaku* [The philosophy of radical subjectivity], in *Nishitani Keiji chosakushū* [The collected works of Nishitani Keiji], vol. 1 (Tokyo: Sōbunsha, 1986), 3.

6 Nishitani Keiji, *Nishida Kitarō*, trans. Yamamoto Seisaku and James W. Heisig (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 4.

7 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964), 57.

8 *The Record of Linji*, ed. Thomas Yūhō Kirchner, trans. Ruth Fuller Sasaki (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009), 10.

9 See *The Śūraṅgama Sūtra*, trans. Rev. Bhikṣu Heng Sure et al. (Ukiah: Buddhist Text Translation Society, 2009), 159–66.

10 Dōgen, *Fukanzazengi* [Universal recommendation of Zazen], in *Dōgen Zenji goroku* [Recorded words of Zen master Dōgen], ed. Kagamishima Genryū (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1990), 171.

out form; it pervades the ten directions and is manifesting its activity right before your very eyes”¹¹ in the face of a barking dog or of a giggling toddler bounding forward, or in the honk of a goose or of an eighteen-wheeler flying by.

Looking into the effectively imaged living eyes of Manjusri, a lion, or Bodhidharma, one is enabled to look back into and through oneself. A reversal of seer and seen takes place, and the myopically egocentric I/eye is dissolved in the vortex of what Merleau-Ponty dares to call “absolute vision.”¹² Yet however absolute this vision may be, insofar as it dissolves dualistic oppositions in an experience of what Nishida calls “seeing without a seer,”¹³ it nevertheless always remains finite and perspectival. There is no omniscience involved here, but rather a participatory awakening to an intimate respirational exchange between oneself and others within the dynamically differentiating and multiversal whole of Nature.

Nature in Which We Live and Breathe and Have Our Being

The spiritual wisdom explicitly invoked in Cao Jun’s *Manjusri* is implicitly evoked in all his paintings, perhaps especially his landscape paintings. The return announced in *The Return of the King* can be taken to bespeak a resuscitation and revitalization of this wisdom of respirational nonduality, a wisdom that pervades the intertwined pursuits of painting, philosophy, and religion throughout the Chinese tradition. In one of the earliest and most influential treatises on painting in this tradition, *Record of Classifying Ancient Paintings* (c. 550), Xie He

posits as the first and most important principle of painting that it must manifest a “spiritual resonance and vital movement” (*qi yun sheng dong*).¹⁴ The first character in this phrase, *qi*, refers to the psychophysical breath-energy that circulates between and indeed produces the myriad beings of the cosmos. A. C. Graham compares *qi* to the Greek *pneuma* (“wind, air, breath”) and says that “it is the energetic fluid which vitalizes the body, in particular as the breath, and which circulates outside us as the air.” In Chinese cosmologies, *qi* is “the universal fluid, active as Yang and passive as Yin, out of which all things condense and into which they dissolve.”¹⁵ In his translation and analysis of dozens of treatises written by Chinese artists and art critics through the centuries, Osvald Sirén documents how this idea, namely that there is “a spiritual force imparting life, character and significance to material forms, something that links the works of the individual artist with a cosmic principle,”¹⁶ pervades and motivates Chinese painting, most of all landscape painting.¹⁷ In his account of the centrality of the notion of *qi* in classical treatises on Chinese landscape painting, Mathias Obert translates it into German as *das Atmen*, stressing that it indicates not a static substance but rather the dynamic “breathing” that mediates the inseparable physical and psychological dimensions of existence.¹⁸

Classical Chinese landscape painting, known as *shan-shui hua* or “mountains-and-waters painting,” was developed by scholar-artists who were also often engaged in spiritual exercises that require what the Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi calls a “fasting of the mind,” a meditative practice of concentration through which one comes to “hear with the mind rather than with the ears,” and then to “hear with the vital

energy [*qi*] rather than with mind. For the ears are halted at what they hear. The mind is halted at whatever verifies its preconceptions. But the vital energy is an emptiness, a waiting for the presence of things.”¹⁹ François Jullien writes that Chinese landscape painting demonstrates the process through which, “by moving back inside us to the more primordial, more unappropriated, nonrigid state of breath-energy, we relate to external realities in an ‘empty,’ available way and enter into a relationship, not of knowledge, but of complicity with them.”²⁰ No less is demanded of the viewer of the painting, who is invited into this respiratory revelation of self and world.

Artists are presumably able to invite viewers into this respirational exchange insofar as they paint in response to an inspiration wherein roles of viewer and viewed are continually reversed. Merleau-Ponty remarks that “inevitably the roles between [the artist] and the visible are reversed. That is why so many painters have said that things look at them.”²¹ Claiming that we need to speak of “inspiration” here in a literal sense, he goes on to say that “there really is inspiration and expiration of Being, action and passion so slightly discernible that it becomes impossible to distinguish between what sees and what is seen, what paints and what is painted.”²²

Zen urges us toward such an experience of respirational and visual reversibility in a dialogue that speaks of a donkey looking down into a well and of the well looking back at the donkey.²³ Looking down into the fathomless depths of reality, eventually those depths begin to look back at us, illuminating our pale and shifting images of ourselves. Nietzsche writes that “when you look long into an abyss, the

11 *Record of Linji*, 11.

12 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” in *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 169.

13 Nishida Kitarō *zenshu* [The complete works of Nishida Kitarō], vol. 5 (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1987–89), 179.

14 Osvald Sirén translates this phrase as “resonance or vibration of the vitalizing spirit and movement of life,” and as “Spirit Resonance (or Vibration of Vitality) and Life Movement” in his *The Chinese on the Art of Painting: Texts from the Painter-Critics, from the Han through the Ch’ing Dynasties* (1936; repr., Mineola: Dover, 2005), 22, 219.

15 A. C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China* (Chicago: Open Court, 1989), 101.

16 Sirén, *Chinese on the Art of Painting*, 23.

17 “The first principle [of Xie He’s treatise], [*qi yun sheng dong*], will occupy us in every section of this exposition of the Chinese attitude towards painting; it is unavoidable as the most inclusive formula for the essence of the painter’s art” (Sirén, 21).

18 Mathias Obert, *Welt als Bild: Die theoretische Grundlegung der chinesischen Berg-Wasser-Malerei zwischen dem 5. und dem 12. Jahrhundert* (Freiburg: Alber, 2012), 146–48.

19 Zhuangzi: *The Essential Writings with Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, trans. Brook Ziporyn (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2009), 26–27.

20 François Jullien, *The Great Image Has No Form, or On the Nonobject through Painting*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 171–72.

21 Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” 167.

22 Merleau-Ponty, 167.

23 See Gerry Shishin Wick, *The Book of Equanimity* (Boston: Wisdom, 2005), 161–63. John Daido Looi relates this dialogue about the donkey and the well to a meeting in which “teacher and student know each other intimately.” See Dōgen, *The True Dharma Eye: Zen Master Dōgen’s Three Hundred Kōans*, trans. Kazuaki Tanahashi and John Daido Looi, with commentary and verse by John Daido Looi (Boston: Shambhala, 2005), 392.

abyss also looks into you.”²⁴ As Nishitani suggests,²⁵ perhaps Nietzsche’s “self-overcoming of nihilism” is not far from the experience of Christian mystics such as Meister Eckhart, who prays to God to rid him of God, and who speaks of breaking through all dualistic distinctions to the aboriginal “silent desert into which no distinction ever gazed,”²⁶ and living “empty and free” (*Iedig und frei*) and “without why” (*ohne warum*) from there.

The East Asian philosophical-religious worldview that informs and is expressed by mountains-and-waters paintings is, in any case, not that of a dualistic transcendent theism. In contrast to a certain biblical theology of external transcendence, Nishida, who otherwise professes profound sympathies with some Christian theologies, suggests that “Buddhism is characterized by an orientation toward immanent transcendence.”²⁷ The experience of what Nishida calls immanent transcendence in fact may not be that far removed from the experience that Augustine expresses when he says that God is “more intimate than my innermost,” even if Augustine’s transcendent theism leads him to add that God is “superior to my uppermost,”²⁸ and even if the Christian tradition has tended to understand this superiority in terms of metaphysical exteriority. Whereas any pantheistic or, better, panentheistic conception of *deus-sive-natura* is anathema to a transcendent theism that insists on God’s supernaturalness, for the majority of East Asian thinkers, Buddha or Dao is not outside me, above me, speaking down to me from on high, but rather is, as Paul says, borrowing in turn a pagan phrase, that “in whom we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

One of Cao’s most thought-provoking paintings is *Genesis* (plate 14). The inscription tells

us that it was painted in traditional Chinese style after viewing the lava formations at Rotorua, a lakeside town on the north island of New Zealand originally settled by Māori and known for its geothermal activity. While the Chinese title of this painting alludes specifically to the first book of the Bible, there is no transcendent or anthropomorphic deity on the scene. Rather, the swirling geological shapes naturally separating into light and dark recall the account of the genesis of the cosmos in the *Daodejing*, according to which the ineffable Way (*dao*) spontaneously gives rise to the vital energies (*qi*) of *yin* and *yang*, the interaction of which generates the myriad things of the world.²⁹ Looking back through the myriad things to these elemental energies, we catch a glimpse of the Dao itself as “a thing confused yet perfect, which arose before heaven and earth,” which “goes everywhere yet is never at a loss.”³⁰ The *Daodejing* calls on us to model ourselves on Earth, which in turn models itself on Heaven, which in turn models itself on the Way, which ultimately models itself simply on naturalness, that is to say, on its own natural spontaneity (*ziran*).³¹

In the Daoist-influenced language of Zen Buddhism, Dōgen writes: “The Dao [or Buddha Way] is originally perfect and all-pervading”; in other words, the Buddha-nature is everywhere. “And yet,” he adds, “if there is a hair’s breadth of deviation, [one’s separation from it] is like the distance between heaven and earth.”³² Elsewhere he says: “Although the Dharma amply inheres in every person, without practice, it does not presence; if it is not verified, it is not attained.”³³ Like Zhuangzi, Dōgen recommends a meditative practice of “studying of the self” to the point of “forgetting the self” and allowing the ten thousand things of the world to come forth and enlighten one. Rather

than “carrying the self forward to things,” projecting one’s myopically egocentric ideas upon them, one lets things come forth and illuminate the self-in-the-world.³⁴

This is the paradox we are presented with: We have never left Nature, and yet we are alienated from it. Since our self-nature belongs in Nature, this is a self-alienation. We need to learn how to become who we are and how to return to where we have always been. In his *Country Path Conversations*, Heidegger’s characters express a comparable thought: “*From everywhere we must continually turn back to where we truly already are.*” Yet this turning back demands at the same time a turning outward. For, they ask, “must we not rather look away from ourselves in order to find ourselves where we truly are?”³⁵ They conclude that we need to “notice that we are already walking on the ever reliable country path,” a country path (*Feldweg*) that leads through a field (*Feld*), an open-region of Nature, wherein “we become aware of just a bit of the abundance—a bit that is shown by its simple vistas.”³⁶ Such is the experience of wandering down a path through the mountains and across the rivers sketched in a Chinese landscape painting.

Finding the Self in Nature: Returning to Where We Are

In East Asian traditions such as Daoism, Buddhism, Neo-Confucianism, and Shinto, the natural world is often experienced and thought of in salutary, even salvific, terms. We do not need to be saved *from* nature; we need to be healed *by* it, since our goodness, freedom, and creativity is realized not apart from Nature

24 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), 89, §146.

25 See Nishitani Keiji *chosakushū*, 1:5–32; Nishitani Keiji, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, trans. Graham Parkes with Setsuko Aihara (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), 90; and Nishitani Keiji, *Religion and Nothingness*, trans. Jan Van Bragt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 61–68.

26 Meister Eckhart, *Deutsche Predigten und Traktate*, ed. and trans. Josef Quint (Munich: Hanser, 1963), 316.

27 Nishida Kitarō *zenshū*, vol. 11 (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1987–89), 434.

28 Augustine, *Confessions* 3.6.

29 See Philip J. Ivanhoe and Bryan W. Van Norden, eds., *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2005), 183 (*Daodejing*, chap. 42).

30 Ivanhoe and Van Norden, 174–75 (*Daodejing*, chap. 25).

31 Ivanhoe and Van Norden, 175 (*Daodejing*, chap. 25).

32 Dōgen, *Fukanzazengi*, 171.

33 Dōgen, *The Heart of Dōgen’s “Shōbōgenzō,”* trans. Norman Waddell and Masao Abe (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002), 9, translation modified.

34 See “The Presencing of Truth: Dōgen’s *Genjōkōan*,” trans. Bret W. Davis, in *Buddhist Philosophy: Essential Readings*, ed. Jay Garfield and William Edelglass (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 256–59.

35 Martin Heidegger, *Country Path Conversations*, trans. Bret W. Davis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 112, 115.

36 Heidegger, 115, 120; see also Heidegger, 132–33. On the question of nature in Heidegger’s thought, see my “Returning the World to Nature: Heidegger’s Turn from a Transcendental-Horizontal Projection of World to an Indwelling Release to the Open-Region,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 47, no. 3/4 (Dec. 2014): 373–97.

but rather as a part of it.³⁷ An artist, Cao Jun writes, “cannot find art or real pureness unless he comes into contact with nature.”³⁸ We see this motif throughout Cao’s paintings, and it is made explicit in the title of one: *Cleansing the Mortal Heart in the Clear World* (plate 24). Our hearts and minds are purified by a sojourn in the mountains, a hike through the woods, or even a stroll along the beach. Human virtues are not cultivated by transcending Nature, but rather by returning to it. Our humanity is not achieved by overcoming our animality, as if non-human animals were merely inhumane beasts. Cao’s *Love* (plate 5), for instance, suggests that we have much to learn even about such core human and “humane” virtues from the affection displayed between a mother tiger and her cub. And his botanical and elemental images, such as *Poetry’s Evocative Power over Wind and Fog* (plate 28) and *Poetic Water* (plate 7), directly point to the intimate interconnection between human activities and the processes of the rest of the natural world.

In one of his essays, Cao writes: “Ancient [Chinese] masters [of painting] expressed the world they see in a special way, holding [to] the law that humans are an integral part of nature.”³⁹ In another essay he claims:

Any creation of human being, including [creations in] brush and ink, is really extremely childish in front of nature, and any thought which attempts to dominate nature is totally [ridiculous],...against the objective law, in fact. Human being is just a part of nature, how can [humans] take the [attitude of] domination of nature?⁴⁰

Cao’s own works, such as *The Return of the King* and, in a different key, *Drunk under the Shadow of Flowers* (plate 6), remind us that our true home is in Nature. Not nature as one delimited region of beings set over against another, such as the human or artificial, and certainly not nature in the sense of a reductive materialism, but rather Nature as the dynamic and differentiating whole of Being. Not nature as opposed to the city, but Nature that surrounds and encompasses the city, Nature that

is the abode of all that is human, including our metropolises and our technological artifices, even when these frequently alienate us from their and our natural origins.

Cao creatively inherits a long and rich tradition of various styles of Chinese painting, including the *gongbi* realist style, as reflected in the renowned tiger images of Cao’s teacher Feng Dazhong, as well as the *xieyi* or “sketching the idea” style, as witnessed in Cao’s own tiger paintings such as *Love* (plate 5). Another variant of his adoption and adaptation of the *xieyi* style can be seen in Cao’s looser and more expressive ink-splash and color-splash technique, as manifested in his *Autumn Reflected in Cloud-Enshrouded Mountains* (plate 40) and *The Mountain Looks like the Sea* (plate 8). His *Wonderful Scenery* (plate 36) beautifully combines a color-splash technique with a more controlled depiction of the flowers in a style reminiscent of the birds-and-flowers (*huaniao*) genre of Chinese painting. Yet regardless of which classical style he is following and furthering, attentiveness to natural phenomena remains a constant in Cao’s paintings. His works consistently remind us of the original embeddedness of our human lives and artifacts in the encompassing wondrousness of Nature.

Especially significant in this regard is Cao’s inheritance of the tradition of *shan-shui hua* or mountains-and-waters paintings in his landscapes such as *Misted Mountain and Trees* (plate 21). This style first flourished in the Five Dynasties (907–60) and Northern Song dynasty (960–1127) periods with masters such as Li Cheng (919–67) and Guo Xi (c. 1020–c. 1090). What came to be known as the Li-Guo style was carried forward by later generations of Chinese landscape artists such as Yao Yanqing (c. 1300–after 1360), whose *Traveling through Snow-Covered Mountains* (fig. 3) typifies the style.

As Wen C. Fong explains, mountains-and-waters painting was first developed in China during periods in which “artists, disenchanted with the world of human affairs, turned away

to seek a realm of spiritual enlightenment” in “communion with nature.”⁴¹ Neo-Confucian thinkers drew on Daoist and Buddhist philosophies to conceive of the relation between “inner and outer” (*wai zhong*) as circular and dynamic; “as the artist sought to describe the external truth of the universe, he discovered at the same time an internal psychological truth.”⁴² Through the recovery of an original connection between the heart-mind (*xin*) and the principles (*li*) of nature, a “unity of human and heaven” (*tian ren he yi*) can be achieved such that the human being is experienced “as a co-creator rather than as merely a creature of the universe.”⁴³ Mary Tregear writes that “in choosing landscape as their major theme,



3. Yao Yanqing, *Traveling through Snow-Covered Mountains*. Hanging scroll; ink on silk, 98.1 x 54 cm (image), Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2011.573.

37 See my “Natural Freedom: Human/Nature Nondualism in Traditional and Modern Japanese Philosophy,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Japanese Philosophy*, ed. Bret W. Davis (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

38 Cao Jun, “Get Out of Studio,” *Collected Works of Cao Jun*, Nov. 8, 2013, http://www.caojunarts.com/html/encjwj/Art_326.htm.

39 Cao Jun, “When Painting Comes to Be a Mission,” *Collected Works of Cao Jun*, Nov. 8, 2013, http://www.caojunarts.com/html/encjwj/Art_335.htm.

40 Cao Jun, “To Start with Image,” *Collected Works of Cao Jun*, Nov. 8, 2013, http://www.caojunarts.com/html/encjwj/Art_324.htm.

41 Wen C. Fong, *Beyond Representation: Chinese Painting and Calligraphy, 8th–14th Century* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 71.

42 Fong, 76.

43 Fong, 75.

painters [in China] were doing no more than seeking to express, as directly as possible, the very ancient Chinese belief in the unity of man and nature.”⁴⁴ Wing-Tsit Chan traces the provenance of this idea of a unity between humanity and the wider field of Nature—an idea “that was to dominate the course of Chinese history”—back to the “Great Norm” section of the *Book of History*, a text dating to as early as the twelfth century BCE.⁴⁵

Yang Xin points out that, from early on, for many Chinese artists and critics “paintings need not—should not—be judged solely by a standard of objective realism. Good paintings, they said, achieve the unity of the objective and the subjective, showing both the image as it exists in reality and the image in the painter’s mind.”⁴⁶ As the seventeenth-century Chan Buddhist (and later Daoist) painter Shi Tao puts it in an inscription on one of his mountains-and-waters paintings, as an artist you must paint from the experience of having gone out into Nature in such a manner that “the mountains and rivers would meet and merge with you in spirit.”⁴⁷ Yet we must be careful not to misunderstand this subject-object unity as a kind of compromising combination of two essentially different realms. Rather, through the acts of producing and viewing paintings, artists and viewers alike are called upon to awaken and return to an originary respiratory exchange between their human nature and the wider field of Nature in which they are situated.

Imbibing the Spirit of Nature: From Guo Xi to Cao Jun

The inscription on Cao’s *Cleansing the Mortal Heart in the Clear World* (plate 24) reads:

To draw mountains and rivers, one must understand their soul and spirit, as the woodsmen and fishermen are capable of

doing. Certainly it is important to read and study the classical works of the ancient scholars. However, it is inadvisable for one to make his cart [i.e., to produce an artwork] within closed doors and just repeat the words of others.⁴⁸

As Cao tells us in his essays, he spends considerable time reading, viewing the works of past masters, and of course working within the four walls of his studio. Nevertheless, his primary inspiration and impetus come from Nature. The inscription on *Movement of Clear Haze* (plate 22) reads:

I lived at the foot of Mount Tai for more than ten years and became familiar with the spirits and temperaments of mountains. Moreover, I lived in seclusion in New Zealand and dwelled beside the sea for a long time, learning to understand the feelings and dispositions of water. Therefore, I am now able to depict mountains and waters with ease, like riding a light cart on a familiar path.

Cao has taken to heart and put into practice the advice given in the first great treatise on mountains-and-waters painting, Guo Xi’s *The Lofty Powers of Forests and Streams* (eleventh century). Guo, who pioneered the genre with masterpieces such as *Early Spring* (fig. 4), writes that “an artist should identify himself with the landscape and watch it until its significance is revealed to him.”⁴⁹ Later in the text he elaborates:

Let one who wishes to portray [the] masterpieces of [Nature’s] creation first be captivated by their charm; then let him study them with great diligence; let him wander among them; let him satiate his eyes with them; let him arrange these impressions clearly in his mind. Then with eyes unconscious of silk and hands unconscious of brush and ink, he will paint this marvellous scene with utter freedom and courage and make it his own.⁵⁰

Guo’s text opens with a rhetorical question: “Why does a virtuous man take delight in landscapes?” He answers:

It is for these reasons: that in a rustic retreat he may nourish his nature; that amid the carefree play of streams and rocks, he may take delight; that he may constantly meet



4. Guo Xi, *Early Spring*, 1072. Hanging scroll; ink and color on silk, 158.3 x 108.1 cm (image), National Palace Museum, Taipei.

in the country fishermen, woodcutters, and hermits, and see the soaring of the cranes, and hear the crying of monkeys. The din of the dusty world and the locked-in-ness of human habitations are what human nature habitually abhors; while, on the contrary, haze, mist, and the haunting spirits of the mountains are what human nature seeks, and yet can rarely find.⁵¹

44 Mary Tregear, *Chinese Art*, rev. ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 108.

45 Wing-Tsit Chan, *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 10–11.

46 Yang Xin, “Approaches to Chinese Painting: Part I,” in *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*, Yang Xin et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 2.

47 Shi Tao, inscription on *Most Spectacular Peaks*, as quoted by Nie Chongzheng, “The Qing Dynasty (1644–1911),” in Yang Xin et al., *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*, 258. See also Shi Tao’s treatise in Sirén, *Chinese on the Art of Painting*, 184–92.

48 I thank Wang Huaiyu and Yang Guang for their excellent translations of the inscriptions on Cao Jun’s paintings. I have made substantial changes only to the translation of the inscription on *A Way to a High Official Position* (plate 30), quoted below.

49 Kuo Hsi (Guo Xi), *An Essay on Landscape Painting*, trans. Shio Sakanishi (1935; repr., London: Murray, 1959), 38.

50 Guo Xi, 43.

51 Guo Xi, 32.

Although his son tells us that Guo “followed the teachings of Taoism in his youth,”⁵² Guo nevertheless does not counsel retreating from society to an uncultivated nature, insofar as that would entail “neglecting the [Confucian social] responsibilities of honour and righteousness.” Hence the *raison d’être* of landscape painting: “Without leaving the room, at once, [the viewer] finds himself among the streams and ravines.”⁵³ “It is as if he were actually in those mountains.” “The blue haze and white path arouse a longing to walk there.” “The contemplation of good paintings” not only “nourishes this longing,” but also, at least partially, fulfills it.⁵⁴ Of course, this demands not only good paintings but also the right state of mind on the viewer’s part: “if one approaches [these paintings] with the sympathetic spirit of a nature lover, their value is high.”⁵⁵

Note how in *Movement of Clear Haze* and *The Firmament and the Jade-Like Lake* (plate 20) Cao depicts humans and human abodes, as have mountains-and-waters painters for centuries since Dong Yuan and Guo Xi, as decentered and diminished—and *thereby* as harmoniously integrated with the other elements of nature. It is telling that, other than in the title, humans do not appear at all in *Cleansing the Mortal Heart in the Clear World*; nor in fact do they appear in most of Cao’s landscape paintings. This might be taken to suggest that our hearts are best cleansed when we get out of the way, when we “forget the self,” as Zhuangzi and Dōgen put it, and let “the ten thousand things” of the natural Way come forth and enlighten us.

Wafts of Mist and Tears of Color

Guo Xi writes of his technique: “After the outlines are made in dark inkstrokes, I trace the outlines repeatedly with ink wash mixed with blue, so that even when the outlines remain visible, the forms appear as if emerging from the mist and dew.”⁵⁶ One of the most striking qualities of Cao Jun’s landscapes, such as *Endless Rivers and Mountains* (plate 15), is the manner in which he is able to reproduce the ephemeral atmosphere of classical Chinese mountains-and-waters paintings and yet do so with such vibrant colors. Especially striking, and strikingly beautiful, are the breath-taking—and breath-giving—swaths of blue that blanket portions of Cao’s landscapes. Even here, to be sure, Cao is creatively inheriting an idiom from the past—in this case from the blue-and-green mountains-and-waters (*qing-lu shan-shui*) paintings, a colorful style that originated in the Tang dynasty with Li Sixun (651–716) and Li Zhaodao (c. 675–741), and that was reiterated by Song dynasty artists such as Wang Ximeng (1096–1119) and Zhao Boju (1120–82), Ming dynasty artists such as Qiu Ying (c. 1494–1552), and twentieth-century artists such as Wu Hufan (1894–1967) and Zhang Daqian (1899–1983).⁵⁷

Nevertheless, Cao’s especially bold use of color can be considered among the most innovative and prominent aspects of his landscape paintings. Maxwell K. Hearn, at the time curator of the Department of Asian Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, tells us that “the aim of the traditional Chinese painter [is] to capture not only the outer appearance of a subject but its inner essence as well—its energy, life force, spirit.”⁵⁸ This certainly can be said to be Cao’s aim as well. However, Hearn goes on to write:

“To accomplish his goal, the Chinese painter more often than not rejected the use of color. Like the photographer who prefers to work in black and white, the Chinese artist regarded color as a distraction.”⁵⁹ Not so with Cao, who in one of his essays proclaims: “Among numerous Chinese painting techniques, color-splashing has become the most proud language for me to directly express my own feelings,” a technique with which he says he enjoys the “highest degree of freedom” of expression.⁶⁰ In another essay Cao writes: “Color is considered as a scourge by Chinese artists, who are afraid of the vulgar outcome [that would supposedly be produced] by adopting color, thus, they come to a standstill in this area.” In contrast he holds “the view that it’s unobjectionable to break some taboos as long as one can create a certain ambience with coordination.”⁶¹ Even when he breaks with traditional rules, however, it comes across as innocently innovative rather than calculatedly rebellious on account of the fact that he is clearly motivated by the sincerity of his feelings and artistic inclinations rather than a contriving desire to appear avant-garde. “I get touched by color,” he confesses, “just as children do, which makes me stay awake the whole night.” Moreover, he suggests, his liberal use of color may not be all that untraditional, insofar as “our ancestors were also infatuated with color.” Some years ago, he writes:

I participated in the archaeological excavation of Han tombs and I was astonish[ed] when I saw the cinnabar painting on the tile which was just unearthed. The exceedingly as well as extraordinarily flamboyant red [made] me feel breathless and even on the edge of crying.⁶²

Those nascent tears of exhilaration later flowed forth in the form of brilliant streaks of color in such paintings as *Rainbow-Colored Costumes*

52 Kuo Jo-hsü (Guo Ruoxu), preface to Guo Xi, *Essay on Landscape Painting*, 31.

53 Guo Xi, *Essay on Landscape Painting*, 33.

54 Guo Xi, 41. As Richard M. Barnhart points out, given that he was employed as a personal painter for the emperor Shenzong, Guo Xi was no doubt first and foremost concerned to “bring the music of nature to the emperor’s eyes and ears,” since the emperor’s status and official duties prohibited him from going out to enjoy the natural world himself. Barnhart also reminds us that it is important to bear in mind the political implications of landscape paintings like *Early Spring*, which were meant to glorify at once the political and natural worlds, with the emperor symbolized by the “master mountain” or “master peak” that brings harmony and order to the myriad phenomena of the cosmos. Richard M. Barnhart, “The Five Dynasties and the Song Period (907–1279),” in Yang Xin et al., *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*, 119; see also Guo Xi, *Essay on Landscape Painting*, 39–40, 58–59.

55 Guo Xi, *Essay on Landscape Painting*, 33.

56 Quoted in Fong, *Beyond Representation*, 94.

57 See Yang Xin et al., *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*, 64–68, 124, 226–27, 317–18, 351.

58 Maxwell K. Hearn, *How to Read Chinese Painting* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 3.

59 Hearn, 3.

60 Cao Jun, “Standpoint of Color-Splashing,” *Collected Works of Cao Jun*, Nov. 8, 2013, http://www.caojunarts.com/html/encjwj/Art_321.htm.

61 Cao Jun, “Chinese Painting Has Suffered a Lot,” *Collected Works of Cao Jun*, Nov. 7, 2013, http://www.caojunarts.com/html/encjwj/Art_315.htm. Subsequent quotations in this paragraph are from this essay.

62 Cao Jun.

of *Land* (plate 12), *The Red Peak* (plate 49), *Colorful Time* (plate 44), and *Pulsating Space* (plate 45).

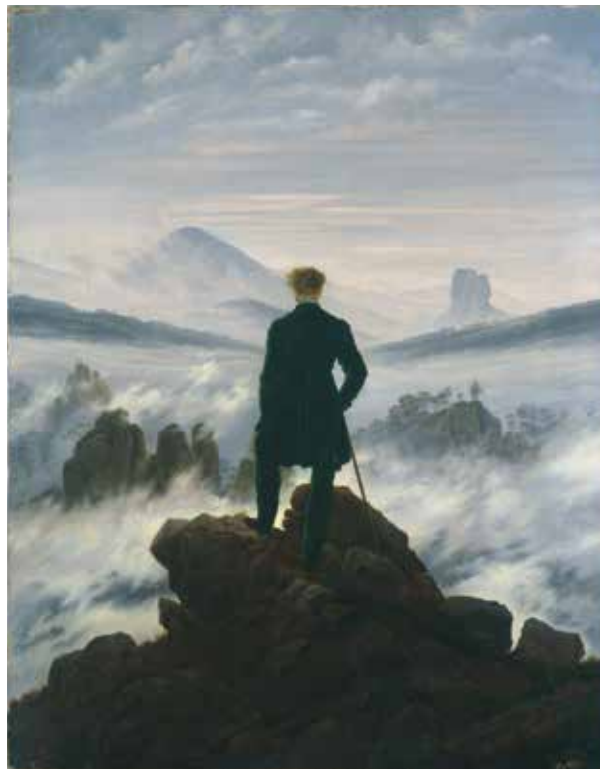
Most provocatively contemporary among these most colorful paintings is *River of Stars Crossing Time and Space* (plate 48), insofar as it can be viewed as carrying out what John Sallis calls a “cosmological turn,”⁶³ a Copernican displacement of the central scene of Nature from earth’s mountains and waters up into the no longer geocentric, much less anthropocentric, heavens.⁶⁴

Regardless of whatever impact the Western science of astrophysics may have exerted on Cao’s worldview, the following inscription on *A Way to a High Official Position* (plate 30) gives us reason to think that Cao’s exposure to Western art has significantly influenced his emotional engagement with color.

The Chinese style of monochromatic ink-wash freehand painting is also a practice of cultivating life. The warmth, peace, and quietude in one’s heart [that corresponds to this style of painting] is like the mood one has when one sits in front of the window in the afternoon reading a classical text and gaining insights into all sorts of human affairs.^[65] But with Western abstract painting, the mood is entirely different. It is more like offering one’s very soul up to the divine. Indeed there have been times when, suddenly and unawares, tears streamed down and covered my face.

Standing Transfixed versus Wandering Freely

As John Sallis points out, with regard to “the employment of obscuring effects such as that



5. Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840), *The Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, c. 1817. Oil on canvas, 94.8 x 74.8 cm, Hamburger Kunsthalle.

of fog,” which allow the vastness as well as the recessive dimensions of nature to be sensed obliquely, the early nineteenth-century Romantic paintings of Caspar David Friedrich invite comparison with Chinese landscape painting.⁶⁶ Indeed, Friedrich’s deployment of mist and fog are among the best analogues we can find in Western painting to both classical Chinese mountains-and-waters paintings and to Cao Jun’s contemporary iterations of this genre. Moreover, not unlike Cao and previous generations of blue-and-green mountains-and-waters painters, Friedrich was able to deftly integrate subtle yet vibrant colors that enhanced rather than detracted from such effects.

However, despite such similarities between Friedrich’s Romantic landscapes and Chinese mountains-and-waters paintings, including

the contemporary colorful ones by Cao, it remains the case that, as Sallis incisively remarks, “nothing could be more alien to Chinese landscape painting than to anchor the painting to the subject by representing his double in the picture itself, as Friedrich does in *The Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* [fig. 5].”⁶⁷ Although Friedrich’s use of fog and horizontal blurring resonate with Chinese mountains-and-waters paintings, the fixed and anthropocentric viewpoint of paintings like *The Wanderer* stand firmly in the lineage of Renaissance artist and author Leon Battista Alberti’s linear perspectivism. Alberti instructs the painter to hold still, shut one eye, and observe a landscape through a window fitted with a mathematical grid, which Alberti himself refers to as a “veil” constructed of intersecting lines of thread.⁶⁸ Albrecht Dürer shrewdly depicts the use of Albertian perspective devices in his woodcuts *Man Drawing a Lute* and *Draughtsman Making a Perspective Drawing of a Reclining Woman* (fig. 6).

It is not difficult to relate Alberti’s vision of painting to what Heidegger calls “the age of the world-picture.” “The fundamental event of the modern age,” writes Heidegger, “is the conquest of the world as picture.”⁶⁹ “Man becomes the relational center of that which is as such.”⁷⁰ To be sure, the modern epoch of the Western tradition may not be as metaphysically monolithic as Heidegger contends. Friedrich’s wanderer himself, after all, can be seen as an inherently and intentionally ambiguous figure: He not only stands triumphantly over nature as its would-be conqueror, but also stands in awe of the sublimity of a Nature that outstrips and threatens to engulf him. Moreover, “that [Alberti’s] representation of space does violence to the way we actually experience things was noted already by Leonardo da Vinci,” who complained that Alberti’s technique “reduces the viewing subject to a kind of cyclops, and obliges the eye to remain at one fixed, indivis-

63 See John Sallis, “The Cosmological Turn,” chap. 6 in *The Return of Nature: On the Beyond of Sense* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 81–91.

64 Cao’s poem inscribed on *The Firmament and the Jade-Like Lake* (plate 20) ends with a reference to the star-filled heavens in which “humans are not yet involved” (*ren wei yang*).

65 Compare the remarks about Guo Xi’s preparations for and attitude toward painting in Guo Xi, *Essay on Landscape Painting*, 37, 52–53.

66 John Sallis, *Senses of Landscape* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2015), 75. See also in this regard Cao’s essay, “Value Vagueness in Painting,” *Collected Works of Cao Jun*, Nov. 8, 2013, http://www.caojunarts.com/html/encjwj/Art_328.htm.

67 Sallis, *Senses of Landscape*, 127.

68 Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, trans. Cecil Grayson (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 65–67.

69 Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 134. For an elaboration of the ideas in this and the following paragraph, see my “Zen’s Nonegocentric Perspectivism,” in *Buddhist Philosophy: A Comparative Approach*, ed. Steven M. Emmanuel (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017), 123–43.

70 Heidegger, *Question Concerning Technology*, 128.



6. Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528), *Draughtsman Making a Perspective Drawing of a Reclining Woman*, c. 1600. Woodcut on paper, 7.7 x 21.4 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 17.37.314.

ible point.”⁷¹ As Merleau-Ponty more recently asks, “What would vision be without eye *movement*?”⁷² Indeed we “normally see with two, constantly shifting eyes”⁷³ and with a “body” that is not only “an intertwining of vision and movement,” but an intertwining of seeing and seen, self and world.⁷⁴

In stark contrast to the egocentric and avowedly Protagorean⁷⁵ world-picture of Alberti’s “visual pyramid,” viewed by an immobile cyclops through a mathematical grid, Guo Xi’s school of Chinese mountains-and-waters paintings promotes what it calls a “floating perspective” (*bao you yu kan*), in part by eschewing any fixed source of light. In one of his essays, Cao writes of the practice of “shifting perspective and ‘view[ing] the surroundings from a mobile focal point’ in Chinese painting.”⁷⁶ As one views a Song dynasty landscape, such as *Summer Mountains*, attributed to Qu Ding (fig. 7), one is “meant to identify with the human figures in the painting, to ‘travel...dwell or ramble’ in the landscape.”⁷⁷ Just so, as one contemplates one of Cao’s landscapes such as *Endless Green Mountains* (plate 17), one’s vision is invited not only to view the dynamically harmonious unity of the landscape from a distance, which is after all only one valuable perspective, but also to enter into and wander freely around the various faces and figures of the mountainous terrain. Guo Xi tells us that we should learn

to appreciate “the ever changing view of the mountain from whatever side one looks” and the fact that “a single mountain combines in itself several thousand appearances.”⁷⁸

Friedrich’s wanderer does not in fact wander at all; he stands transfixed before a landscape he is forbidden to enter any further into. Classical Chinese and Cao’s contemporary landscapes, by contrast, beckon us into what Zhuangzi calls “free and easy wandering” (*xiao yao you*)⁷⁹ among the ever-changing web of interconnections, beyond the static and stifling myopia of our socially prescribed artifices. They invite us to maintain a clear awareness of the transient

fluidity and perspectival finitude of our partial and personal ways, and yet also to cultivate an intuitive sense of how our little lives fit into the greater whole of the Nature that enlivens us, and so of how to best find our ways among the multifaceted mountains and waters of the natural Way.

Cao Jun’s Innovatively Traditional Chinese Gifts to the World

In this essay, we first entered into the world of Cao Jun’s painting through the gate of his *Manjusri* (plate 1). We found that Manjusri’s gaze helps us “turn the light of the mind around” and so to look back more deeply into—and ultimately piercingly through—ourselves. In the *Vimalakirti Sutra*, Manjusri gives the most decisive statement regarding the ultimate Dharma Gate of nonduality, proclaiming its ineffability; the Bodhisattva of Wisdom’s laconic words are superseded only by the layman Vimalakirti’s “thunderous silence.”⁸⁰ Yet on both this side and that of the ineffable experience of awakening, says the Buddhist tradition, we need the “skillful means” of linguistic and artistic expressions. Indeed, earlier in the *Vimal-*



7. Attrib. Qu Ding (fl. c. 1023–c. 1056), *Summer Mountains*, c. 1050. Handscroll; ink and color on silk, 45.4 x 115.3 cm (image), Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1973.120.1.

71 Hubert Damisch commenting on Da Vinci’s *Treatise on Painting*, as quoted in Karsten Harries, *Infinity and Perspective* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 76.

72 Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” 162.

73 Harries, *Infinity and Perspective*, 77.

74 Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” 162–63.

75 See Harries, *Infinity and Perspective*, 67; and Alberti, *On Painting*, 8.

76 Cao Jun, “To Start with Image.”

77 Hearn, *How to Read Chinese Painting*, 20.

78 Guo Xi, *Essay on Landscape Painting*, 40. Jullien suggests that, despite the parallels (noted above) between the “master mountain” and the emperor in paintings such as Guo Xi’s *Early Spring*, the effect of such mountains-and-waters paintings is to allow divergent points of view to dynamically cohere without forcing them into a totalizing structure. See Jullien, *Great Image Has No Form*, 43, 55.

79 See Zhuangzi, chap. 1.

80 See *The Vimalakirti Sutra*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 110.

akirti Sutra itself, a goddess, responding to Shariputra's claim that "Emancipation cannot be spoken of in words," corrects him and says: "Words, writing, all are marks of emancipation" and so "you can speak of emancipation without putting words aside."⁸¹ Words and images can serve not only as approaches to, but also as expressions of, awakening. Whether or not Cao worked with such conscious intentions, I have endeavored to suggest that his paintings can be experienced as catalysts for a spiritual awakening to the Nature that breathes life into our spirit, the Nature in which we live and breathe and have our being.

If, on the one hand, Cao's contemporary re-inventions of traditional Chinese painting express in part the reawakening of a *National Spirit*, as announced in the title and text of one of his magnificent lion paintings (plate 2), on the other hand, by way of bringing his art to a Western audience—residing, as he has, for many years in New Zealand and now in the United States—Cao demonstrates that, in a deeper sense, this is a spirit that potentially enlivens all of humanity. Living and working abroad Cao discovered that, in his own words, "art is beyond national boundary."⁸² To be sure, his work is in an important sense distinctively and self-consciously Chinese. Cao innovatively inherits the spirit of the tradition of Chinese art.⁸³ Yet he holds to the adage: "The more national, the more international."⁸⁴ His artworks are Chinese gifts to the wider world.

Like his tiger in *Looking afar a Thousand Miles* (plate 4), Cao's artistic spirit gazes back into the distant past and far into the future, as well as over into distant lands, without losing touch with the ground underneath its belly.⁸⁵ It wanders about without losing touch with its origins. Cao commutes these days between his new residence and studio in the modern Western metropolis of New York City and the ex-

quisitely traditional Chinese-style gallery and garden dedicated to his work near Yu Qi Ping Lake in Wuxi. In the process of this commute he continues to make uniquely individual as well as distinctively Chinese contributions to the cultivation—and even liberative awakening—of humanity as a whole.

For our part, by emptying ourselves, opening our eyes and minds, and looking carefully at Cao Jun's paintings, we see them seeing into us, and in the vortex of this visual circulation lies the possibility of a nondual awakening. Cao's artwork can be experienced as a medium of awakening to who, what, and where we truly are. Looking into and through Cao's paintings as a means of looking into and through ourselves, what we discover is how we are situated in a Nature that encompasses and enlivens our being among other lively beings. We do not stand outside Nature or over against it; we dwell within it, and we have the potential not only to build modest dwellings here and there in its nooks and crannies, but also to wander freely among its myriad vantage points, like a lion that has been liberated from its self-constructed cage and has returned to its element among the elements.

The inscription on Cao's *The Return of the King* (plate 3) reads in part: "Having investigated both Eastern and Western traditions of art, and having made friends with artists from various ethnic groups, I have been able to open and expand the breadth of my vision." Cao's paintings, in turn, help open and expand the breadth—and the breath—of ours.

81 *Vimalakirti Sutra*, 88.

82 Cao Jun, in a conversation entitled "Go across the Ocean for Art," Collected Works of Cao Jun, Nov. 4, 2013, http://www.caojunarts.com/html/encjwj/Art_282.htm.

83 Cao writes: "Innovation is not in direct contradiction to tradition, as the tradition we see today is exactly the innovation of yesterday. [W]ithout innovation [something] can hardly be handed down. We need [to] figure out that [there is a difference] between copying the ancient and sticking to tradition, for tradition is [a] kind of spirit. A real artist should neglect the traditional form and grasp the traditional spirit, depicting [a] brand new artistic conception" ("Innovation Should Be the Best Condition for Creation," Collected Works of Cao Jun, Nov. 4, 2013, http://www.caojunarts.com/html/encjwj/Art_290.htm). In fact, despite the often remarked emphasis in Chinese painting on learning by copying ancient works and on faithfully inheriting lineages of styles and techniques, there is also, paradoxically, a robust tradition of innovation. Guo Xi's son wrote that his father "was inclined to abandon the old in his welcome of the new" (Guo Ruoxu, preface to *Essay on Landscape Painting*, 31). The ironically canonized iconoclast Shi Tao, who professed to look to Nature, not humans, for instruction, goes so far as to write: "The method which consists in not following any method (of the ancients) is the perfect method....The beards and eyebrows of the old masters cannot grow on my face....If it happens that my work approaches that of some old painter, it is he who comes close to me, not I who am imitating him" (Shi Tao, *Notes on Painting*, trans. Osvald Sirén, in *Chinese on the Art of Painting*, 187–88).

84 Cao Jun, "Go across the Ocean for Art."

85 In "Go across the Ocean for Art," Cao is asked whether, given that his work is rooted in Chinese tradition, he feels rootless having lived for so long outside China. Cao replies: "it's not difficult for me, because I lived in two extreme worlds when I was in China: one is the ancient, and the other is the future. It seems that I care less about the present, no matter [whether it is in regard to] painting comments, or poetry, even philosophy....No great achievements can be gained if I focus only on the present."

Vision

JOHN SALLIS

Its polysemy is unbounded. On the noetic side, its sense ranges from the simplest perception of things to the apprehension of what lies entirely beyond sensibility, from catching a glimpse of the first of a series of stones by which I might make my way across a shallow stream to envisioning a certain triangle, which as such is invisible to sensibility, posited beyond the mere diagram, which at most only provides a visible step on the way to the triangle itself. The glimpse of the stone is immediate, and its sole effect is to guide one's step as one vaguely anticipates the farther course leading across the stream; while, at the other extreme, envisionment of the triangle draws one's vision—and hence oneself—beyond the limits of sensibility. Imagination, too, draws one toward such a beyond, even if what is imagined is something that could in principle be seen. *Vision* names each and every mode in which apprehension through sight in the broadest possible—indeed unlimited—sense takes place. While its generality is thus indisputable, the vastness of its range poses a threat to the very unity of the signification. Its polysemy cannot be brought decisively under control. Its polysemy is unbounded.

Within such a polysemic structure, vision in one sense can readily be transposed to another, producing either direct mutation or, more dynamically, an affinity by which vision in one form is drawn to another. Then there occurs a double vision in which one—the vision set upon the more immediately visible—brings the other—oriented to the less directly visible—to show itself, lets it become manifest.

Such double vision is painted in Cao Jun's work *National Spirit* (plate 2). The lion's vision is cast across the immediate surroundings and in that very gesture is also a vision of the national spirit. The first vision, which the painting depicts not only in the lion's eyes but in his entire posture, makes manifest a vision opening beyond what can be directly, sensibly seen. In this

instance the title supports the passage to this other vision, specifying it beyond the intimation conveyed by the lion's stance. Still further, the inscription puts in play an exemplification by citing a poem about the bravery of soldiers during the Warring States period. Then, somewhat surprisingly, the inscription concludes by recasting this vision into a commemoration of the revolution and of the founding of the party. Lest one conclude from this inscription that Cao Jun is willing to act as apologist for the party, mention should be made of his statement that "the 'Cultural Revolution' almost brought Chinese painting to a dead end."¹ Furthermore, he never ceases to emphasize that a profound understanding of traditional Chinese culture is indispensable to the Chinese artist. His outlook as an artist is absolutely irreconcilable with the Marxist reduction of nature and destruction of traditional culture.

The lion's look is that of a vision that looks beyond. If one follows the series of visionary and linguistic shifts that lead from the depiction of the lion to the commemoration of the revolution, it will become evident that from its conclusion the series also circles back to the beginning. The lion becomes the figure who, borne on by commemorations, looks to the future. Cao Jun has described the creature as one who is looking as from the heart, though he embodies the solidness of stone and the shape of a prototypical weapon.

The barely legible inscription on *The Return of the King* (plate 3) is autobiographical: "On August 25, 2002, my whole family moved to New Zealand. It has been eight years since then. Thanks to God's blessing, I have been able to indulge in reading, writing, drawing, studying Eastern and Western art, making friends with artists of various nationalities, and broadening my vision. Now I will settle down in Sydney, a place where I may well belong. 2011. Cao Jun."

In the title of the work, a range of senses and a certain indetermination can be detected, most notably in the designation *return*. In the inscription there is no direct reference to a return but rather to two arrivals, in New Zealand and in Sydney. Only in an inverted sense can the autobiographical account be regarded as describing a return. This divergence can be taken as a clue that the work is not simply autobiographical; indeed, if it were no more than a personal statement, it could hardly be considered an artwork at all. If it is a presentation of Cao Jun, it can only be a presentation of him *as an artist*, as exemplifying the artist as such. Whatever the place to which he returned—whether to the pristine nature existing only in New Zealand, or to Sydney, or back to China, or to the traditional Chinese painting of mountains and waters—the return was primarily an entry or re-entry into the bearing and practice proper to the artist and to himself as a Chinese artist.

As one surveys the picture as a whole, one's vision is attracted immediately to the eyes of the lion-artist, and no matter how deliberately one regards other parts of the work, one's vision is soon drawn back to the look of his eyes, to the look in his eyes. The look is so intense that one has the impression that one sees the lion seeing. His vision is both penetrating and far-reaching. Even though the lion's vision lacks the requisite specificity, it nonetheless exemplifies the vision that is required of the artist. The vision of the artist must be capable of unveiling things concealed, thereby bringing them into the light. It is a vision that does not simply behold the scene set before it but that dispels the concealment so as to let be seen what would otherwise—were it not for the artist—remain invisible. It is a vision that bestows visibility, reimplacing it in a work in which it can be preserved. Moreover, it is a vision that is typically bound up with the production of the artwork, a vision that unfolds within the very process by which the work is created.

¹ Cao Jun, "Never Create Until Being Qualified for Language," Collected Works of Cao Jun, Nov. 8, 2013, http://www.caojunarts.com/html/encjwj/Art_325.htm. In some cases translation of articles from the Collected Works of Cao Jun has been altered.

The placement of the lion within an eminently natural setting points to the bond of art to nature. Insisting on this connection, Cao Jun writes: “How can an artist experience life if he stays in his studio, far away from crowds, mountains and rivers?...He cannot find art or real pureness unless he comes into contact with nature.”² More specifically, the primary features of the setting, that is, the waterfall and the mountain extending upward beyond the frame of the picture, allude to the tradition of Chinese landscape painting going back to the Song dynasty. The most eminent painters of this period—Guo Xi, for instance—insisted, no less than does Cao Jun, that it is necessary for artists to experience nature and to bring this experience to bear on their art. Artistic vision must be nurtured by the vision of nature.

Both in *National Spirit* and in *The Return of the King*, the painting concentrates one’s vision on the vision of the lion. While a lion has indeed a proto-voice and could be represented as exercising it, as roaring, in these paintings the lion is silent, is caught up entirely in vision. It is not uncommon for vision to be carried on in silence. One often forgoes saying—or attempting to say—what one sees.

What is seen is also a vision. This vision of a vision is what painting offers to one who would exercise vision in face of this vision. The vision offered by painting may be a presentation of an actual scene, though the abstraction essential to painting will always set the painted vision apart from the actual scene. The abstraction is not simply a matter of leaving some portions of the scene out of the painting and thus merely reducing the natural vision. It is also a reconfiguring through which certain moments that go largely unseen in natural vision are brought to light.

Cao Jun’s painting *Poetic Water* (plate 7) was inspired by his vision of the sea during a trip to Antarctica. It was a pure vision, as he stationed himself alone at the rear of the ship in such a way that there was nothing else to be seen except the water. Then he began to see the life of the sea as displayed in the deepening of its color as its depth increased, in its inchoate swirling in which its color shifted through shades of blue, almost becoming white, yet without ever entirely losing its deep blueness. These are the very features that are presented

in the painted vision, yet accentuated in such a way that they become eminently visible.

The landscape paintings depict something that could be an actual scene. In keeping with the tradition going back to the Song dynasty, they are scenes of mountains and waters (the literal meaning of *shan-shui*, which is translated as “landscape”). In most cases a single mountain is foregrounded, while others recede into the distance; the water appears in the form of waterfalls on the mountains and lakes or rivers around the base of the dominant mountain. What is especially distinctive about Chinese landscape paintings is that they present not only the contours and configuration of the mountains but also the obscuring elements that render landscapes to a degree opaque. As Guo Xi said: “Mountains without mist and clouds are like Spring without flowers and grass.”³ In Cao Jun’s landscape paintings this obscuring of the master mountain is carried out by means of ink-splashes. Though the resulting dark areas that conceal part of the face of the mountain are by no means reproductions of the mist and clouds that would actually obscure the mountain, they convey visually in their own way—indeed in a modern way—the limitation of vision of the mountain.

A vision may also be entirely unseen by natural vision. The vision presented in a painting may be such as can be apprehended only in imaginary vision or in vision within a dream. Clearly it is imagination and perhaps a certain oneiric vision that are in play in *Rainbow-Colored Costumes of Land* (plate 12). In this painting it is evident how thoroughly Cao Jun has broken with that strain in Chinese painting that relied solely on ink and brush. He attests that, on the contrary, he is touched by color like a child. In this painting it is imagined that the land—or even the entire earth—is hidden beneath a costume of colors, that the rainbow with its entire spectrum of colors has descended and spread itself out over the land, following certain contours of the land while costuming it with this spread of colors.

In other paintings a cosmic imagination is in play. In *River of Stars Crossing Time and Space* (plate 48) the vision of a cosmic event is displayed. It is the imaginative vision of an enormous expanse of space-time in which the formative and destructive power of the cosmos

shapes things on such a huge scale that only the imagination can comprehend the event. In the extraordinarily lengthy (680 centimeter) painting *Seeking Dream Space* (plate 43), the vision is thoroughly oneiric. The work is like a dream and is to be experienced as if it were a dream. One drifts from image to image without their forming any sequence or pattern. One image dissolves and another appears, the first hardly even a shadow of anything determinate, the other equally enigmatic. From one image to another, one’s vision moves slowly along the length of the painting, like a vision in a dream.

Yet, even in relation to such highly imaginative or oneiric paintings, Cao Jun insists that the artist must remain open to nature. Close contact with nature remains imperative for the artist no matter how far removed the vision presented in his painting is from actual scenes. Art is nourished by nature but also serves to return us to nature so that we take joy in the vision of a beautiful landscape, whether in natural vision or in the vision of an artist. It is reported that when Guo Xi had finished his masterwork *Early Spring*, he presented it to Emperor Shenzong in order that the emperor, thoroughly engaged with his responsibilities as ruler, could nonetheless, by means of the painting, experience the rejuvenating effect normally produced only by sojourning in the mountains and along the streams. To be sure, Cao Jun repeatedly attests to the need for the Chinese artist to remain, in certain respects, attached to the Chinese artistic tradition and indeed to traditional Chinese culture as such. He like to quote the saying that “an artist needs to have read a thousand books.” Yet, he stresses equally that “an artist needs to read nature word by word, sentence by sentence, and to mark the most touching part.”⁴ Because humans belong to nature, the artist must learn to read the book of nature. This requires that he open his eyes to nature, that he take up the vision offered by nature.

Vision is almost the only thing of concern to the artist—almost, but not quite.

Painting as such does not let sound. One’s vision of a painting does not require activation of the voice; it does not depend on one’s speaking. Nothing is lost if, as one engages vision of a painting, one remains completely silent. Needless to say, it is the same on the

2 Cao Jun, “Get Out of Studio,” Collected Works of Cao Jun, Nov. 8, 2013, http://www.caojunarts.com/html/encjwj/Art_326.htm.

3 Quoted in John Sallis, *Senses of Landscape* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2015), 121n5, 134n28.

4 Cao Jun, “Observing and Sketching from Nature,” Collected Works of Cao Jun, Nov. 7, 2013, http://www.caojunarts.com/html/encjwj/Art_305.htm.

side of the painting: no sound comes from the painting. The vision that it offers is completely silent.

And yet, the fact that a painting emits no sound does not exclude its sounding in another manner. As one surveys *The Return of the King* (plate 3), one will hear the gushing sound of the waterfall and the pounding of the water as it reaches the ground and throws up into the air a cloud of spray. Assuredly, mere blind looking at the picture will not suffice; imagination is required in order to release the sounding. Yet imagination as it enables the sounding is not mere phantasy; it is not a matter of freely, without any attachment, calling up images. Rather, in this situation the imagination is bound up with vision: vision of the painting gives imagination its parameters, while imagination brings to life what is depicted in the painting.

Such a release of sounding can occur also in paintings that are more abstract, provided a relatively determinate figure can be discerned in them. In *Boundless* (plate 47) water is shooting up from out of the earth in a manner similar to that of a geyser. Its force is so great that it reaches the uppermost area of the painting and even streams on beyond the edges of the canvas. Here again a vision animated by imagination will let the thunderous sounding of the water be heard, as, boundless, it escapes the earth and soars beyond the bounds of the painting. Even though it is hardly, if at all, depicted, one may also hear imaginatively the impact as the water falls back to the earth, assuming that, though boundless, it does indeed fall back to earth rather than completely escaping.

Vision is almost the only thing of concern to the artist. But it can be supplemented by the animating capacity of imagination in such a way that a sounding may be evoked in and from the vision offered by the painting.

Vision supplemented in this manner is almost the only thing of concern to the artist. Almost—but not quite.

For most paintings—indeed all of Cao Jun's paintings—have titles, and the titles belong integrally to the paintings. Their relation to the painting can take various forms. In some cases—in some of Klee's works, for example—the

title is actually a component of the painting to such a degree that the work as such must be conceived as consisting of the painting together with the title. But this is not the form that the relation between a painting and its title takes for Cao Jun. He explains in fact just how and at what stage the entitling occurs in the process of producing a painting. He writes: "First of all, I produce the main part with traditional brush and ink as well as with modern forms of composition. Then I do color-splashing, gold-splashing, and gold-sprinkling according to the subject, along with diverse methods in the details." He goes on to mention some of these methods and then concludes: "At last, I come up with a proper title."⁵ Thus, for Cao Jun the title is not part of the work itself; the painting could stand alone without the title and could go unaffected even if they were to be labeled "untitled" (though "untitled" is itself a kind of privative title). In any case, though Cao Jun's paintings have a certain independence from their titles, all have titles. What he requires is only that the title be proper to what, at the final stage, the stage of entitlement, has been created. The title must be such that it is fitting for the painting. The requirement is not that they be merely descriptive in straightforward fashion, though there are some that border on being entirely descriptive—for example, *Lotus* (plate 29) and *Wonderful Scenery* (plate 36). On the other hand, many of the titles are highly poetic—for example, *The Mirror like Water Purifying the Shining World* (plate 9) and *A Cloud-Enshrouded Mountain Enters into a Dream* (plate 13). Yet, in nearly all cases the title contributes significantly to the interpretation of the painting. Without the title *The Mountain Looks like the Sea* (plate 8), it would be exceedingly difficult to envision what is displayed in the painting. Much the same could be said regarding *Autumn Reflected in Cloud-Enshrouded Mountains* (plate 40)—were it not for the text inscribed on the face of the painting. For what is inscribed is a poem that describes the look of nature—the vision it offers—as autumn arrives and the way this look is reflected in the mountains; it tells also about various events during a mid-autumn festival.

It is characteristic of Chinese paintings—and distinguishes them from nearly all products of Western art—that in most cases, though not in all, there are inscriptions on the face of the painting. Most of Cao Jun's paintings, though

not all, bear inscriptions. In some cases the inscription is merely the title often accompanied by the date of composition and the artist's name. In other cases it is a poem, borrowed, for instance, from a famous Chinese poet or composed by Cao Jun himself. Still others are autobiographical or fairly direct identifications of the theme of the painting.

Indeed, what is of concern to the artist is, above all, vision. But vision can be enhanced if supplemented by imagination and paired with titles and with inscriptions.

Yet, titles and inscriptions are not merely additions to a painting. Because they consist of language, they are of an entirely different order. As linguistic, they open the domain of meaning, of significations correlative to the linguistic units or signifiers. There is no greater compass, no more encompassing difference, no more extensive interval than that between vision such as is offered by a painting and meanings as brought to bear through titles and inscriptions. This is the difference within which all other differences are situated. It is the difference of all differences. Its full extent is embraced by the word *sense*, which, allotted to both sides of this difference, is divided from itself.

Ever again it is attested—most directly, though not exclusively, by mathematics, by the invisibility of its objects—that vision has the power to extend beyond itself, to mutate into a vision of the sense beyond sense, into a vision of intelligibility. Then it will have appropriated both the supplement and the pairing that otherwise would appear only to accompany it.

Then it can again be said, but now, as at the outset, without qualification, that vision is the only thing of concern to the artist. For the vision that painting will let be seen will have proven to be sense in every sense. And yet, in painting, everything, every sense, will come back to the vision of line and color and of the forms and figures they present.

Paintings can be made to sound, some more directly than others, some in a more audible register than others, some almost blaring while others can barely be heard. The sounds may be those of nature; indeed they will all be sounds of nature even if in some instances they originate at such distance that nature

5 Cao Jun, "Issues Concerning Chinese Painting Materials," Collected Works of Cao Jun, Nov. 8, 2013, http://www.caojunarts.com/html/encjwj/Art_336.htm.



1. Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944), *Sketch for Composition II (Two Riders and Reclining Figure)*, c. 1910. Watercolor on paper on cardboard, 32.9 x 32.9 cm, Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich.

is only barely to be heard in them. They may be the sounds of animals, as in the case of the potential roar of the creature in Cao Jun's lion paintings. They may be the soft, delicate sounds of flowers or trees swaying in the wind or dripping with new-fallen rain. They may be the sounds of natural elements, of the thunder that will accompany the vision of lightning, of the storm that rages in the mountains, of the downpour of a summer shower. Or even of the silence of falling snow. For one way to sound is to be silent. Only what can sound can be silent.

There are paintings that can sound musically, paintings that can sing. In *Endless Rivers and Mountains* (plate 15), one can sense the expansive sound rhythmically echoing between the mountains. With only the slightest hyperbole, one can say that mountains have their voice, that they can—and often do—sing. Judging especially from the title of *A Light Rain Echoing a Poem* (plate 10), this is a painting that sings beautifully, for it presents both the echoing sound of the light rain and the words of a poem. A sounding with words, musical tone

set to words, is precisely what constitutes song.

In a number of Cao Jun's paintings, one can sense a certain shift in the direction of music, a certain approximation to music. Such movement toward the threshold is to be expected in light of Cao Jun's endorsement of Kandinsky's conception of the relation of painting to music. Just as music does not represent any objective things but rather expresses our innermost sentiments, so, Kandinsky proposes, painting should today follow the example of music and no longer bind itself so closely to the representation of things. Many of Cao Jun's paintings are in accord with Kandinsky's proposal by virtue of the way in which they are posed between abstraction and figuration, taking form by way of a hovering between these. In this respect they bear comparison with a number of Kandinsky's paintings including several

of the studies for his major *Compositions* (fig. 1).

The shift of painting in the direction of music has been thought in a more fundamental way in Hegel's *Aesthetics*. In the hierarchical system of the arts that Hegel posits, painting leads over to music as the higher form. It is not that painting is somehow just converted into music but rather that through a certain development it approximates to music, that is, it comes to the threshold of the transition from painting to music. Hegel traces this development in which painting comes to be ever more oriented to beauty in the specific sense of pure shining. What he calls "the magical effect of coloring" leads painting to mutate to such an extent that it advances ever closer to the threshold of music. Here is how Hegel describes the effect of the magic: "In general, it may be said that the magic consists in so handling all the colors that what emerges is an inherently objectless play of shining, which forms the extreme hovering summit of coloring, an interpenetration of colors, a shining of reflections that shine in other shinings and become so fine, so fleeting,

so soulful that they begin to pass over into the sphere of music."⁶

This advance toward an objectless play of reflections, toward interpenetration of colors in a shining that shines in other shinings is beautifully exemplified in most of the paintings in Cao Jun's space series. In *Colorful Time* (plate 44), the swirling colors interpenetrate, while offering only the most remote hint that they might represent some object. In *Nirvana of Phoenix* (plate 46), the interpenetration of colors is still more thorough; and except for the trace of the phoenix in the upper right, there is no object adumbrated in the painting. In *River of Stars Crossing Time and Space* (plate 48), a vision of shinings within which are still other shinings begins to take shape. This doubling of shinings is most manifestly visible at the center of the painting where small, bright yellow areas shine through the darker yellow-brown area. Yet, it is *The River of Melody* (plate 50)—appropriately including a musical term in its title—that is the most superb example in the entire series. In this painting the shinings in other shinings have become extremely fine, assuming the guise of tiny, mostly yellowish dots scattered diagonally across the painting. Moreover, they are drawn along either in or alongside a river, though the depiction is so thoroughly objectless that the river cannot be discerned as such. The shinings within shinings are thus fleeting as they are caught up in an ascensional movement that continues on beyond the upper right of the painting. This limit beyond which there is no further vision of the fine, fleeting, soulful shinings represents the threshold, and it is music that lies beyond.

In that beyond, the things that are of concern to the artist—now the composer—will be inverted. No longer will there be vision of music, but rather music will itself let new visions come forth, visions so inseparable from music that they could never have submitted to painting alone.

6 G. W. F. Hegel, *Ästhetik*, ed. Friedrich Bassenge, vol. 2 (West Berlin: Das europäische Buch, 1985), 221. My translation.

PLATES

According to Cao Jun, Chinese culture regards humans as forming an integral part of nature. The artist must be especially close to nature and must bring the experience of nature to bear on his art. Cao Jun writes: “With its unique power nature brings mountains, seas, flowers, birds, insects, and fish into being and endows all these with vitality. These are exactly the things that an artist needs to record with his brush and ink.” Cao Jun declares that an artist needs to “travel thousands of miles” so as to expand and deepen his understanding of nature. Cao Jun has followed this advice at least in spirit, traveling to such remote places as Antarctica and northern Alaska. The sights he has observed in such places have, by his own testimony, been sources of inspiration for his art.

Yet for Cao Jun the Chinese painter does not simply imitate nature but rather approaches it within the framework of traditional Chinese culture and philosophy. Thus, artistic expression is furthered by reading, which deepens the understanding of tradition. Cao Jun says that the painter “must have read a thousand books.” One of the painters whom Cao Jun most admires is the renowned artist Li Keran (1907–89), the first Chinese painter who, like the impressionists, made nature his studio. Cao Jun cites a motto that Li Keran put forth, calling it the maxim of the Chinese art world. The motto says: “Involved in tradition with the greatest efforts, devoted to creation with the utmost daring.”

1. Manjusri 文殊菩萨

2010, ink and watercolor on paper, 119 x 55 cm

In Mahayana Buddhism, Manjusri is regarded as the oldest and most important bodhisattva. A bodhisattva is a figure capable of reaching nirvana but who delays doing so out of compassion for other sentient beings, indeed in hopes of freeing them from the cycle of death and rebirth. Manjusri, in particular, is considered the embodiment of a wisdom that extends far beyond that of other mortals. As here, he is often depicted as riding on a lion; his wisdom is to be instilled in the mind so as to tame it, just as a figure riding on a lion will necessarily have tamed the creature.

The inscription on the painting begins by naming the figure depicted. It then declares that the work follows the style of the esteemed artist Zhang Daqian, a twentieth-century painter for whom Cao Jun often expresses profound respect. The inscription also mentions that the work is painted on royal stationery, a special antique paper with a golden finish. Such paper with superior absorbency was originally produced for the royal family. Using such rare and expensive paper is a way of showing respect for the subject of the painting and for those who inspired it.

The seals below the inscription identify Cao Jun as the owner of the work. They also refer to him as the proprietor of Yihua, the name of his gallery in Wuxi. This name derives from *Yihualun* (*About a Painting*), a book on painting theory by the renowned early Qing dynasty painter Shi Tao. Thus, the name of Cao Jun's gallery alluded to Shi Tao, who exercised considerable influence on Cao Jun's artistic style. In his painting *The Waterfall on Mount Lu*, Shi Tao exemplifies teachings that are echoed by Cao Jun: that there is a close connection between engagement with nature and artistic creation.

Shi Tao (1642–1707), *The Waterfall on Mount Lu*, c. 1700



THE SPIRIT OF ANIMALITY

Cao Jun's paintings of lions and tigers were all created just before or during the years he spent in New Zealand. The fact that he chose to paint wild animals reflects his view that New Zealand is a place where wild, pristine nature still exists, "the last pure land on this earth." Asked in an interview about his choice of New Zealand as a place to create his art, he responded with several favorable descriptions of this land: "it is pastoral rather than industrial, the weather is spring all year round, and the scenery is radiant and enchanting." More generally, he speaks of his realization that it is advantageous to take up Chinese art abroad, since this promotes independent thinking on the nature and future of Chinese art. His exodus to New Zealand was thus a matter not of abandoning Chinese art but of gaining distance from it.

Many of Cao Jun's paintings are on rice paper. If the paper is more than twenty years old, it has excellent absorbency and is especially suited for ink-splashing. But, following the example of many of his predecessors, Cao Jun has learned how to make his own rice paper, which contributes to the style of his painting. Yet, from a technical point of view, what he regards as most significant is the manipulation of ink and brush, which provides the criterion for assessing whether a painting is good or bad.

2. National Spirit 国风

1999, ink and watercolor on paper, 180 x 144 cm



Cao Jun explains that though the lion is looking beyond as from the heart, his body is solid like stone; moreover, the curved shape of the lion's back is like a bow, and it is as if arrows are shot from his eyes.

The inscription is a poem, "National Mourning," by Qu Yuan, a famous poet from the Warring States period. The poem is composed of nine stanzas, the first eight describing in detail the armor worn by the soldiers from the State of Chu, the weapons they carry, and how, though they fought bravely, they lost the battle, yet in a heroic way. The ninth stanza celebrates the soldiers' bravery and their fortitude in their defiance of invasion. The last stanza points out that though their bodies are dead, God instills spirit into them (or their holy spirits will live on), and their brave souls will be heroes even among the ghosts. Cao Jun links past to present battles by appending: "Spring of 1999, citing verses of Qu Yuan to commemorate the revolutionary pioneers."

3. The Return of the King 王者归来

2011, ink and watercolor on paper, 212 x 144 cm

The inscription expresses the autobiographical significance of this work. It reads: "On August 25, 2002, my whole family moved to New Zealand. It has been eight years since then. Thanks to God's blessing, I have been able to indulge in reading, writing, drawing, studying Eastern and Western art, making friends with artists of various nationalities, and broadening my vision. Now I will settle down in Sydney, a place where I may well belong. 2011. Cao Jun." Though the return depicted in this work can be understood in several ways, it most likely refers to the return to pristine nature, which, in Cao Jun's view, exists today only in New Zealand.

The painting can be seen as a portrait of the artist in the guise of a lion. Courageous like the lion, the artist ventures to show on his canvases scenes never before seen. Yet, the focal point of the painting lies in the eyes of the lion. Like the lion, the artist must be capable of vision that is penetrating and far-seeing.



4. Looking afar a Thousand Miles 纵目千里

2004, ink and watercolor on paper, 68 x 134 cm



Like the lion paintings, this work depicts the tiger as possessing keen vision. This trait is emphasized even more by the explicit reference to vision in the title, indeed to an unthinkably keen vision capable of looking afar a thousand miles. Cao Jun praises his teacher Feng Dazhong, “who is famous for his fine brushwork tigers.” Yet, he attributes Feng’s achievement not only to his excellent use of Chinese painting materials but also to his unique understanding of traditional Chinese culture.



Feng Dazhong (1949–), *Rest in the Shade*

5. Love 爱

2004, ink and watercolor on paper, 68 x 134 cm

The exceedingly fine brushwork in the animal paintings demonstrates the technical mastery that Cao Jun has achieved. No pertinent details are missing, and in some cases every individual hair on the coat of the animal is distinctly depicted. The short inscription conveys a sense of just how difficult it is to achieve such technical perfection: "For freehand brushwork it is hard to achieve the perfect configuration." Yet, referring to Cézanne, Cao Jun insists that technique alone is not sufficient to produce original and creative art. Not only must the tradition of Chinese art play a role and provide a framework, but also, as the animal paintings clearly demonstrate, artistic depictions must be infused with life. The artist must be able to celebrate the feelings and passions that animate living beings, whether they be tigers or humans.



6. Drunk under the Shadow of Flowers 醉花荫

2009, ink and watercolor on paper, 140 x 250 cm



The inscription informs us that it is summer in New Zealand. Everything is in bloom, and the animals are entranced by the bright colors around them and also no doubt by the sweet fragrances given off by the flowers. The posture of the tiger at the center of the picture conveys a sense of intoxication. Although the tiger is the focal point to which the viewer is immediately attracted, the viewer is soon prompted to follow the tiger's line of vision toward the profusion of flowers and the other tiger sur-

rounded by them. One wonders whether the tiger's gaze is fixed only on the flowers or whether it is also erotically drawn toward the other tiger. The painting has a certain whimsical character, which is likely to evoke a similar feeling on the part of the viewer. To this extent it aptly illustrates—though in a light-hearted rather than profound way—Cao Jun's principle that “an artist can strike a responsive chord in the hearts of its viewers if he touches them with his painting.”

THE POETICS OF WATER

This section includes five paintings that have water as their principal object, though this orientation is indicated primarily by the titles of the works. Though Cao Jun maintains that “an artist must develop his characteristic style,” referring, in particular, to Paul Cézanne (1839–1906), it is not readily apparent how these five paintings display a unity of style. Indeed, they seem to exemplify more accurately another requirement that Cao Jun lays down for the artist. He says that “an artist has to change his painting subject, size, or material unceasingly.” One might conclude that it is the task of the viewer to look for the unity of style within works displaying such changes. In any case, there is another respect in which the character of Cao Jun’s art converges with Cézanne’s. Both insist that it is essential that the artist maintain contact with nature. In Cao Jun’s words, the artist “cannot find art or real pureness unless he comes into contact with nature.” Because it is necessary for the artist to experience nature, Cao Jun stresses that the artist should avoid simply remaining in his studio and leading a cloistered life. He mentions two eminently successful artists who were thoroughly engaged in worldly affairs, Zhang Daqian (1899–1983) and Pablo Picasso (1881–1973).

7. Poetic Water 如诗之水

2013, mixed media on canvas, 85 x 142 cm

Cao Jun has explained that this work was inspired during his voyage to Antarctica. As the ship sailed toward the region around the South Pole, Cao Jun was alone at the rear of the ship. There were no sounds to distract him but only the steady hum of the ship's engine. As he leaned over the back railing, there was absolutely nothing else to be seen except the water. In his total absorption in the sight of the water, it was as though time stood still; for

all the things—objects moving, people talking, music playing, etc.—by which we are usually aware of the passage of time had been completely blocked out. There remained only the sea, which tells no time, though it is by no means motionless. Though time had ceased to be relevant, the sea appeared as though it were alive. Its life lay in its blueness, in the deepening of the color as the sea itself became deeper, and in its inchoate swirling as for a

moment it seemed almost a variant color, only to return to its native blue.

This description is aptly displayed in *Poetic Water*.



8. The Mountain Looks like the Sea

苍山如海

2013, mixed media on canvas,
89 x 116 cm

Cao Jun repeatedly declares that in Chinese painting the goal is never just to produce copies of the objective world. The artist does not represent things in the way the scientist does. This does not mean that the artistic representation is inferior to the scientific but rather that it is informed by other factors such as the feeling evoked by a scene or the interplay of the visual forms that make up the scene. Such

an interplay can be readily seen in *The Mountain Looks like the Sea*, which displays the common look of mountain and sea by means of an interplay of some forms suggestive of a mountain with others suggestive of the sea. The way that these forms overlap and blend expresses the visual relation between mountain and sea.



9. The Mirror like Water Purifying the Shining World 镜水澄华

2015, ink on paper, 180 x 300 cm

The title of this painting comes from Chen Xizu (1767–1820), a poet of the Qing dynasty. It is inscribed, along with Cao Jun's seal and colophon, on the panel on the right side of the work. The four inner panels represent the water, identifiable as such by the presence of fish. The second panel from the left includes both images and in the top half the following inscription: "The mirror like water purifying the shining world, icy vase like a clean mirror, green leaves beautiful on their own, the pearl-like fountainhead remains clear by itself."

One of the most distinctive features of this painting is that it is done entirely in ink. Even the lotus leaves, which in most of Cao Jun's paintings appear bright red, appear in this work in various shades of black wash (ink and water) produced by various combinations of ink and water. In the inscription on the panel at the extreme left, Cao Jun explains the reason for representing bright red flowers as areas of black: "My purpose in drawing lotuses in ink is to reach a kind of spiritual ambience. In painting freehand style on the newly acquired Xuan paper, I don't care whether it is delicate or clumsy. My hands and heart are free from hindrance, and it has quaint charm."

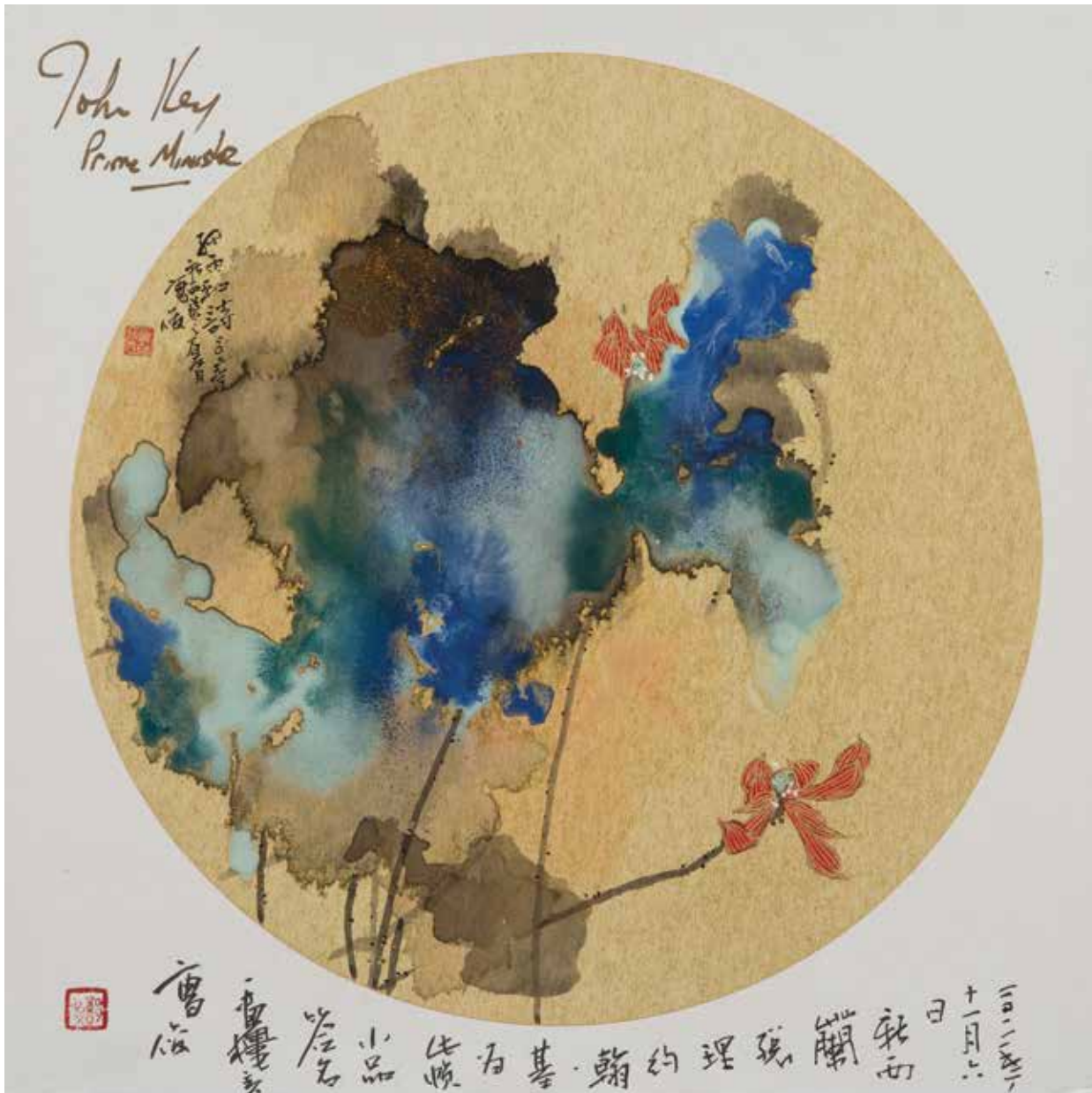
Cao Jun does not specifically identify the mirror to which both the title and the first inscription refer. In the second inscription he writes about how and with what expectation he went about painting the black lotuses. One might presume, then, that the mirror is the painting itself. Does this painting not literally purify the world by purifying it of color? Does not painting as such purify the mundane world by drawing forth the beauty hidden within it?



10. A Light Rain Echoing a Poem

细雨和诗

2011, ink and watercolor on paper, 50 x 50 cm



In this painting, relatively small for Cao Jun, many of the most characteristic features of his works are displayed. These are the very irregular forms ranging from black to medium gray (produced by ink-splashing) but also mutating into brown and into blue (produced by color-splashing). There are also lotuses, which are very common in Cao Jun's paintings. Their color contrasts strongly with the colors of the dark irregular areas. If the sense of the work is taken from the title, then its sense is that a poem has the power of determining or transforming the manner in which the light rain appears to us.

The inscription reads: "On November 6, the prime minister of New Zealand, John Key, signed this small artwork." In this instance a practice not uncommon in traditional Chinese painting is evident: the inscription was added sometime after the painting had already been completed.



11. Dream Pool Essays

梦兮笔谈

2006, ink and watercolor on paper, 68 x 544 cm

Water is not the object of this painting. Rather, the pool mentioned in the title refers to what occurred during the work's production. In the inscription Cao Jun describes his technique: "Spilled color and golden lotus are my subjects in recent years. Usually, at the beginning I draw with traditional ink technique. Before it has dried, I splash strong colors and water on it and thereby let water, ink, and color infuse into each other as in a dream." Note that the gold of the golden lotuses is infringed upon—

infused—by the blue forms, which tend toward black, that is, toward a color that is not the color of any flower. Furthermore, nearly all the forms are cut off by the edges of the work. What counts in the work is not the representation of lotuses but the pool produced by the mutual infusion of water, ink, and color. What results are not copies of objects but rather incoherent forms akin to those that appear in dreams.



THE LOOK OF LANDSCAPE

The tradition of landscape painting goes back to the Song dynasty (960–1279) and has remained one of the principal genres in the subsequent history of Chinese painting. Yet, the Chinese understanding of what constitutes a landscape is quite different from that of Western artists. For the Chinese painter a landscape is not a more or less level expanse of land with fields, hills, and forests. Rather, as the Chinese word *shan-shui* literally says, a landscape in the Chinese sense consists of mountains and waters. In most cases the focus is on a single mountain, the so-called master mountain, which is sometimes taken as a metaphorical counterpart to the emperor. In addition, there are typically lakes or rivers at the base of the mountain and often waterfalls on the mountain itself.

The foremost landscape painter during the Song dynasty was Guo Xi (c. 1020–c. 1090). His work *Early Spring* is often considered the supreme artistic achievement of the Song dynasty. It is certainly one of the works that set the standard for subsequent artists. Its dynamic depiction of the master mountain accompanied by a double waterfall and surrounding lakes make it a paradigm of Chinese landscape painting as such. In addition to his paintings, Guo Xi was the author of a treatise, *The Lofty Powers of Forests and Brooks*, which established the principles that later Chinese landscape artists would follow.

One of Cao Jun's most remarkable achievements consists in his recovery of the essence of the ancient form of Chinese landscape painting into which he incorporates features and techniques belonging to modern Chinese and Western art.



Guo Xi, *Early Spring*, 1072

CLOUDS, MOUNTAINS, SEA

The first set of paintings that present the look of landscape depicts various elements of nature that have not—at least not yet—congealed into landscapes in the strict sense. In the paintings these elements appear in different connections and different guises. They range from the depth of the earth to the height of the clouds.

12. Rainbow-Colored Costumes of Land 大地霓裳

2013, mixed media on canvas, 80 x 105 cm

Cao Jun tells of having participated in an archaeological excavation of tombs from the time of the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). He says that he was astonished when he saw the paintings on the tiles that were unearthed. The sight of the brilliant, flamboyant red left

him breathless and on the verge of crying. *Rainbow-Colored Costumes of Land* attests to Cao Jun's devotion to color. In this painting the land, the earth, is hidden behind a costume of color. The entire color spectrum—the colors of the rainbow—is represented in the paint-

ing. The artist suggests that these colors be thought of—that is, imagined—as bequeathed to the earth by the gods, as having flowed down through the aether to the terrestrial surface.



13. A Cloud-Enshrouded Mountain Enters into a Dream 云山人梦

2012, ink and watercolor on paper, mounted on board, 140 x 78 cm

The mountains in the distance, especially the ones on the right, are illuminated as in the bright light of day. These mountains are contrasted with the master mountain, which, except for its bare outline, is mostly obscured behind large, irregular forms through which there is offered only a glimpse of the stony surface. The Chinese characters translated as “enters into a dream” can be used almost idiomatically to mean “fall asleep” or “entering into a dreamy state of mind.” As the mountain comes to be obscured by the ink-splashed forms, which depict the enshrouding clouds, it is as if it entered into the nocturnal obscurity of a dream. The inscription says simply yet curiously: “Written in New Zealand to record what was seen that day.”



14. Genesis 创世纪

2010, ink on paper, 368 x 144 cm

Cao Jun has said that this enormous work was a turning point in the development of his style. In his writings he describes style as “formed through unique observation and distinctive experience.” These tasks require, in turn, that when the artist engages in creative activity he do so with a fresh mind and with passion. In the inscription on the work, Cao Jun describes both the site of observation and the method of expression by which *Genesis* was created: “Drawn with traditional Chinese technique of splashed ink to depict the lava I saw at Rotorua, New Zealand.” Since lava comes from the depths of the earth, the observation of it as it spews forth from a volcano (or as it would have spewed forth) may well have prompted the artist to envisage the earth as the hidden source or, in traditional terms, as the mother of all that comes to be. Such a vision is strengthened by the observation of lava as a black substance spread across the surface of the earth. It is significant that lava in this form can serve as the first step in the genesis of land. It is to genesis in this primordial sense that Cao Jun gives expression in this work.



MOUNTAINS AND WATERS

In connection with his discussion of landscape painting, Cao Jun refers to traditional Chinese philosophy and observes that it has had a favorable influence on the creative activity of Chinese artists. In particular, it has infused into art an idealistic and humanistic orientation. As a result, Chinese landscape painting does not consist merely in the representation of beautiful scenery but is also shaped by the artist's understanding of man as a part of nature and by his interpretation of natural landscape, of what is essential to it and of what is required in order to represent it artistically.

15. Endless Rivers and Mountains 江山无尽

2016, ink and watercolor on paper,
108 x 78 cm

All the landscape paintings in this exhibition display the two elements that define traditional Chinese landscape painting. This is especially striking in *Endless Rivers and Mountains*, which presents the master mountain, some waterfalls on it, and a river at its base. These features are accentuated by the contrast between the master mountain and the others. The remoteness of the other mountains, their distance from the foregrounded master mountain, is represented by their lighter tone, a traditional technique dating back to the Song dynasty. In addition, the painting includes multiple instances of water: several waterfalls and a river at the base of the mountain. The large irregular form, which appears to be non-representational, has been produced by color-splashing. According to Cao Jun this technique is “the proudest language form to express directly our own feelings.” Such expression is essential to landscape painting; it is the primary factor that distinguishes such painting from the mere reproduction of beautiful scenery. In other works Cao Jun also employs related techniques such as ink-splashing, gold-splashing, gold-sprinkling.

In the inscription Cao Jun refers to his recent drawings of mountains and rivers and then adds: “Thoughts emerge as from a fountain, which delights me very much.”



16. Shennongjia Impression 神农行

2016, ink and watercolor on paper, 78 x 108 cm

Shennongjia is a mountain in Hubei Province. In the inscription Cao Jun says: “Wandering in the holy Shennongjia in 2016, I was often inspired by what I saw and wanted to make a record of it. Now it is realized.” In this painting the large form that is the result of color-splashing has two distinctive features. First, at its center it opens up so as to reveal a pile of stones. Second, in the top left it abruptly mutates into a much lighter color, which is midway between the color of the form and that of the rest of the painting. In one of his descriptions of the

technique, Cao Jun mentions two ways in which color-splashing can be carried out. He says: “One can dip the large brush into the ink, applying it to the rice paper; or one can pour the ink over the rice paper slowly.” Yet, skillful practice of traditional brushwork lays the foundation for color-splashing. The artist must “take ink-and-wash freehand brushwork as the precondition of color-splashing.”



17. Endless Green Mountains

青山无尽

2016, ink and watercolor on paper, mounted on board, 108 x 78 cm

In this work there is an apparent conflict between the title and the painting itself. For in the picture the mountains are not green; neither is there any trace of green. If one observed, however, that the mountains are quite dark, bordering on black, then it is reasonable to conclude that nightfall is near and that only the barren surface on one side of the master mountain is still illuminated by sunlight. At this time of day, the mountains in the distance would no longer look green and whatever green there might be on the master mountain is covered by the color-splash form.

The inscription identifies the location: "To recall the trip to Chile years ago. New York, 2016 summer."



18. Skyscraping Cliffs 群峭壁摩天

2016, ink and watercolor on paper, mounted on board, 108 x 78 cm



The inscription on this painting is a poem by the famous Chinese poet of the Tang dynasty, Li Bo. It reads: “The steep cliffs scrape the sky of green jade, while the free and easy wandering makes one forget about time. Searching for the ancient road among the clouds, I lean upon rocks to listen to the flowing spring.”

In this painting much of the surface is covered by a very irregular form produced by ink-splashing, this expression taken as a general term that includes color-splashing. The method of ink-splashing is not simply a matter of blindly splashing ink on paper. The artist must have in mind the image to be created, the color to be splashed, and the effects to be produced. The more common procedure is to pour ink mixed with pigment onto rice paper; but another procedure is to dip the brush into the ink and then freely spread it onto the paper. Cao Jun stresses that the artist must exercise control and that this requires a great deal of practice. Only in this way can the artist predict the outcome and avoid sheer arbitrariness and blind creation.

19. Green Shade under North Windows 绿荫初集北窗下

2016, ink and watercolor on paper, mounted on board, 108 x 78 cm

In this painting the form produced by ink-splashing is broken up into several more or less discontinuous parts. Thus, certain areas of the mountain are obscured, while others are visible in the spaces between the ink-splashed parts. This peculiar spacing shows clearly how something can be obscured and yet remain visible in the very midst of the obscuring effect. Cao Jun observes that an obscuring effect “reinforces the mysterious atmosphere of a painting.” He continues: “The mysterious ambience can never be absent from Chinese painting, as poetic quality derives from the mystery. A painting should be endowed with something poetic. Strictly speaking, an artist has to be a poet first, has to be embraced by a poetic feeling.”

The requirement that paintings include obscuring elements goes back to the Song dynasty. The effect that Cao Jun achieves with splash was originally produced by means of mist, haze, fog, and clouds. The painter Guo Xi formulated this requirement most succinctly: “Mountains without mist and clouds are like Spring without flowers and grass.”

The inscription is taken from an inscription on a painting by Kun Can (1612–74), a painter of the early Qing dynasty. It reads: “Green shade under north windows, yellow birds twitter now and then between high trees; my heart becomes like a wall, while the whole aroma of incense ascends in front of the black mountains.”



20. The Firmament and the Jade-Like Lake 苍穹玉镜

2016, ink and watercolor on paper, mounted on board, 108 x 78 cm



Although Cao Jun regards much modern Western art as “moribund,” he often heeds the advice of his fellow Chinese painter Zhao Wuji to combine aspects of Western and Chinese painting. Just as Zhao fuses Chinese ink painting with modernist abstraction, to produce works comparable Paul Klee’s, Cao Jun does something similar with Wassily Kandinsky.

Cao Jun expresses his view of the relation of painting to music by citing from Kandinsky’s *On the Spiritual in Art*: “Music has for several centuries been the art that uses its resources not to represent natural appearances, but to express the inner life of the artist and to create a unique life of musical tones. An artist who sees that the imitation of natural appearances, however artistic, is not for him... sees with envy how naturally and easily such goals can be attained in music, the least material of the arts today. Understandably he may turn toward it and try to find the same means in his own art.”

Cao Jun describes his fusion of styles in the inscription, a rhymed poem. The first two verses speak of old fountains jingling among a mountain range and deep forests, a clear and chilly river beside the precipitous cliff. The last two verses depict a scene where the endless firmament is reflected on the jade-like lake and the sky is filled with stars while humans are absent.



Zhao Wuji (1921–2013),
Gravure II, 1957



Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944), *Panel for Edwin R. Campbell No. 2*, 1914

21. Misted Mountain and Trees

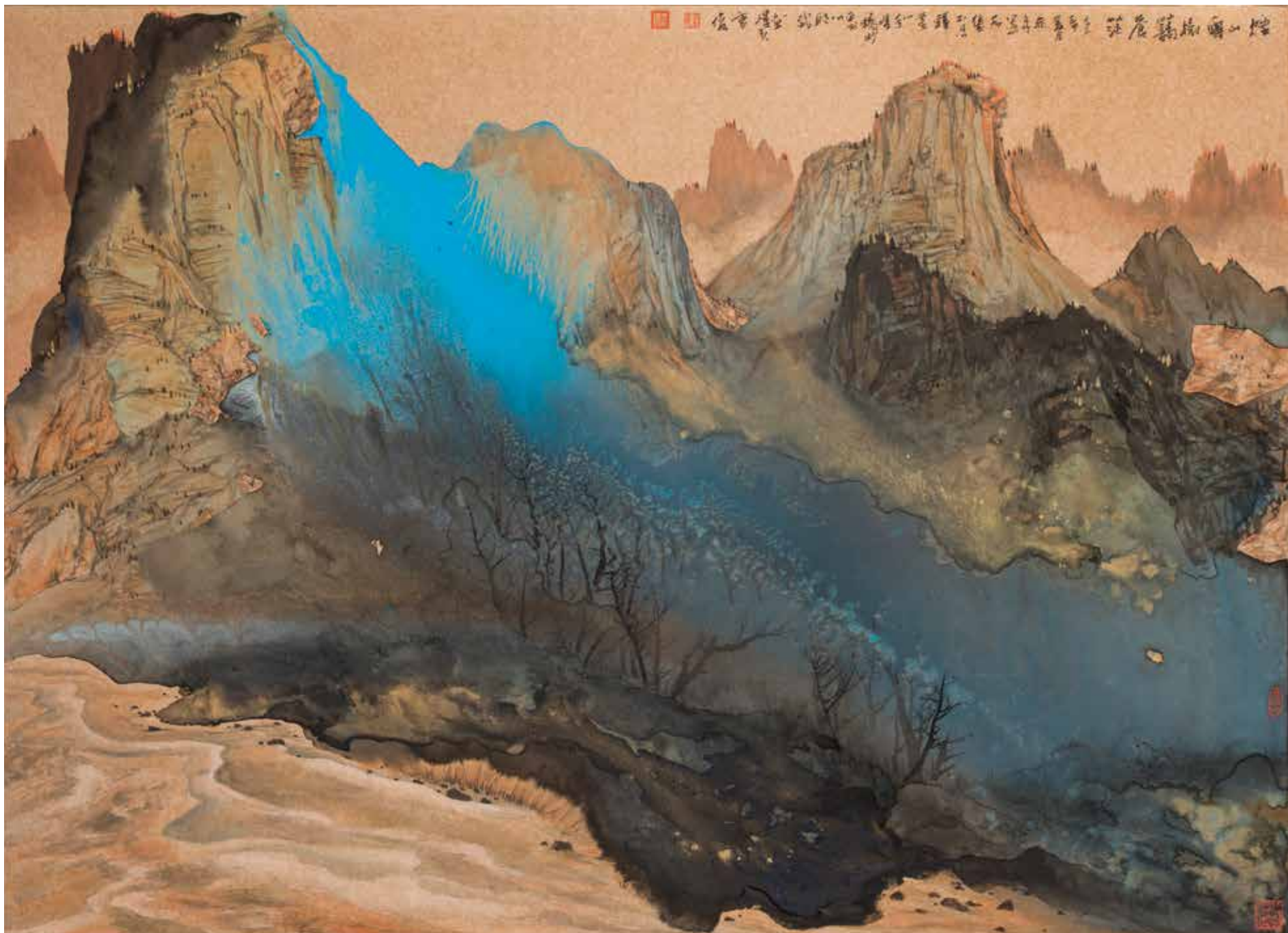
烟山云树霭苍茫

2016, ink and watercolor on paper, mounted on board, 78 x 108 cm

Cao Jun inscribes this painting: “In the summer of 2016, I have been drawing mountains and water quite often and just could not stop. My heart and hands are both delighted and the wonderful subtlety lies mostly in my heart.”

The Chinese expression “mountains-and-waters” (*shan-shui*) is what is translated as “landscape.” In this work both the title and the painting itself show the mountain—the nearest one—obscured by mist. This recalls the ancient requirement in Chinese painting that a mountain must always be represented as obscured

by mist or fog or clouds. But there are two features that distinguish this work from many of Cao Jun’s other landscape paintings. First, there is no single mountain that completely dominates the picture; even though one is more prominent, it shares the foreground with two others. Second, the obscuring is depicted by the fact that through the ink-splashes the obscured trees are still visible.



22. Movement of Clear Haze 清岚动

2016, ink and watercolor on paper, mounted on board, 78 x 108 cm

In this work the traditional features of Chinese landscape painting are still displayed, though the dominance of a master mountain is reduced in favor of a more irregular form. A building at the far left hints at a human presence. The expression “clear haze” refers to the way in which the haze clears away here and there. In this particular way the painting meets the ancient requirement for an obscuring that contributes to the appearance of the mountain. Cao Jun’s autobiographical inscription

reads: “I lived at the foot of Mount Tai for more than ten years and became familiar with the spirits and temperaments of mountains. Moreover, I lived in seclusion in New Zealand and dwelled beside the sea for a long time, learning to understand the feelings and dispositions of water. Therefore, I am now able to depict mountains and waters with ease, like riding a light cart on a familiar path. New York, 2016 summer.”



23. Blue Cloud 青云

2016, ink and watercolor on paper, mounted on board, 120 x 114 cm

In *Blue Cloud*, Cao Jun again uses ink-splashing to represent the obscuring element, in this case a cloud through which certain areas of the master mountain are visible. Cao Jun celebrates paintings of such majestic mountains and at the same time prescribes that the artist should be equipped with extraordinary ability to excavate beauty from ordinary life. As the paradigm of both capacities, he names Li Cheng, the famous tenth-century painter who was the precursor of the Song tradition of landscape painting.

The inscription reads: “Autumn of 2016, coming back from New York to Shanghai.”



Li Cheng (919–67),
A Solitary Temple amid Clearing Peaks, c. 960



24. Cleansing the Mortal Heart in the Clear World 清境洗尘心

2016, ink and watercolor on paper, mounted on board, 108 x 78 cm



This painting has all the features that link Cao Jun's art to the ancient tradition. Yet, it handles these features in such a way that, especially through ink-splashing, it introduces modern, abstract motifs. The inscription for this work is especially instructive: "To draw mountains and rivers, one must understand their soul and spirit, as the woodsmen and fishermen are capable of doing. Certainly it is important to read and study the classical works of the ancient scholars. However, it is inadvisable to divorce oneself from reality and simply follow what others have said. 2016."

25. Thousands of Rivers Converge

万水归堂

2016, ink and watercolor on paper, mounted on board, 120 x 114 cm

This painting is a depiction of the origin of the world. This description is given in the inscription: “Everything has its origin. When chaos first opened up, it became steep and high mountains, and rocks are always rugged. 2016, coming back from New York and dwelling in Shanghai.”

This work moves further away from traditional Chinese landscape painting than any of the other landscape paintings in this exhibition. The master mountain is replaced by huge rocks between which an abyss opens up; and there is virtually no trace of waters. In this painting, perhaps as much as in any other, Cao Jun follows “Master Zhang Daqian,” as, by his own testimony, he also did in the work *Manjusri*. He credits Zhang with going beyond Chinese painting.



Zhang Daqian, *Panorama of Mount Lu*, 1981–83

26. Vast Sky and Autumn Water

秋水长天

2017, ink and watercolor on paper, mounted on board, 108 x 78 cm



In this work the obscuring effect of the color-splashed area is greater than in most of the other landscape paintings. It conceals almost completely the form that might prove to be a master mountain, yet by virtue of the obscurity, it leaves undecidable whether a dominant mountain would come into view if the obscuring effect were dispelled. Another, more subtle obscuring effect is seen in the contrast between the reference in the title to the vast sky and the scene of the painting itself, in

which the sky is obscured both by the mountains and by its color, which has not a trace of sky blue. On the other hand, the reference that the title makes to water is fully realized in the painting. In addition to the conventional river at the base of the mountain, there are multiple waterfalls and even the spray produced by their impact. The inscription merely states the date of composition: "Early summer, 2017."

27. Golden Autumn 金秋

2017, ink and watercolor on paper, mounted on board, 108 x 78 cm

This work displays the classical motifs of Chinese landscape painting. There is a master mountain or at least a configuration of mountains in the upper center that dominates the presentation. Waters appear in the form of a waterfall and a river. The color-splashed area represents the moment of obscuring, accentuating it by the way the trees on the mountainside are visible through it. This work demonstrates that obscuring not only conceals but also makes visible.

The inscription reads: "In memory of the landscape of Zhangjiajie. Written and painted in early summer of 2017, New York." Zhangjiajie, a city in Hunan Province, is the site of a famous scenic area. The landscape is dominated by thousands of jagged quartzite sandstone columns, many rising to more than 200 meters. The area also encompasses forests, rivers, and waterfalls. All these elements appear in the painting. Most notable are the exceptionally vertical peaks, which are suggestive of the sandstone columns.



View of the landscape of Zhangjiajie



BOTANICALS

Cao Jun's botanical paintings take several forms. Some display bright colors, usually of lotuses, along with dark areas produced by ink-splashing. Others are black and white and include very extensive texts, not as mere inscriptions on the painting but as occupying entire panels alongside other panels with images. There are still others, some black and white, some in color, that are very disproportionate, the height greatly exceeding the width, or conversely. It is perhaps in the botanical paintings Cao Jun reveals his devotion to color-splashing most clearly. He openly attests to the importance that this method has for him. He says: "Among numerous Chinese painting techniques, color-splashing has become the best language for me to express directly my own feelings." Cao Jun indicates that the distinctions between the botanicals and other forms such as landscape painting should not be overemphasized. He proposes even that the artist "break the boundary between mountains-and-waters painting and flowers-and-birds painting, making comparisons so as to figure out their common law."

28. Poetry's Evocative Power over Wind and Fog 诗句成风

2014, ink and watercolor on paper, mounted on board, 108 x 78 cm

The inscription on this painting comes from a poem by Zhao Yugu, a poet of the Yuan dynasty. It reads: "When poems are finished, wind and fog change their countenance. When drinks are finished, everything else is completely forgotten. From drunken eyes half open, I look toward the Island of Immortals. Half of it is bathed in clouds, while the remaining is enfolded in haze."

The painting itself presents the clearing that poetry can set in motion. The form at the bottom left can be taken as the fog that is being dispelled by the power of poetic verse. Moreover, the wind has shifted as a result of the evocative power of poetry, and as the dark forms that would conceal the lotuses are blown to the side, the flowers emerge from the darkness into the light. The entire scene is transfigured as if one beheld it in a state of intoxication; and in face of such a clearing, one looks beyond to the mystery of human mortality.



29. Lotus 荷花

2006, ink and watercolor on paper, mounted on board, 40 x 40 cm



In this work Cao Jun covers more than half of the picture proper with a dark, mostly blue ink-splashed form. Note how the work depicts the lotus stems as they extend downward from the dark form as well as the lotus blossom, and related forms as they emerge from the darkness. *Lotus* offers a portrait of life as it stems forth, sustained by the earth and yet obscured in its genesis. Cao Jun takes pride in the fact that the work bears the signature of Helen Clark, who, at the time it was created, was prime minister of New Zealand, where Cao Jun was then living.

30. A Way to a High Official Position 青云得路

2015, ink on paper, 180 x 300 cm

The inscription on the panel that is second from the left reads: "A pond emerges in light rains. 2015 autumn, New York." The fish and the plant life depicted on this panel and on the three panels to its right indicate that this is the pond to which the inscription refers. The inscription on the panel at the extreme left reads: "Ink painting in freehand brushwork is also a practice of cultivating one's body. The warmth, peace, and quietude in one's heart is like the mood one has when one reads in front of the window in the afternoon and gains insights into all the things in the human

world. But with Western abstract painting, it is quite different. It is more like submitting oneself to divinity. Indeed, I used to have tears all over my face all of a sudden without knowing it. 2015, autumn, New York, the impressions I have gathered after painting watercolors so often recently." The strong contrast that Cao Jun draws here is an index of the difficulty of fusing Chinese painting with modern Western art, a project he advocates and undertakes in many of his works.



31. A Pond with the Fragrance of Lotus 一塘荷气

2006, ink on paper,
190 x 520 cm

The inscription to the right reads: "Like fairies dancing on water, the Hu brush pen dances with ink. 2006, early summer. Written upon receiving the old Xuan paper." Hu is the name of a famous kind of brush. Xuan paper is a kind of rice paper. The older the rice paper is, the better its absorbency. Cao Jun says that for

ink-splashing it is desirable to use rice paper that is more than twenty years old.

The inscription to the left reads: "In the summer of 2006, I was invited to exhibit my works back in China. During my trip to several towns in southern China, I studied the craft of producing Xuan paper and Hu brushes. In my hometown, I wrote with the Hu brush produced by Wang Yipin on ancient rice paper made in

Anhui Province. It was such a divine pleasure. Lotus is my favorite theme of drawing. It represents the emotive disposition of the Chinese people and the classical Oriental appeal. Moreover, the incorporation of calligraphy into painting is the quintessence of Chinese art. The lotus also symbolizes men of honor and humility. In addition, lotus and harmony are homophonic. My lotus paintings stem from Xu Wei's water paintings and are informed by Ba



Da's and Shi Tao's style." Xu Wei is an artist of the Ming dynasty. Ba Da and Shi Tao are painters from the early Qing dynasty.

On this extremely large work, the forms that occupy the six inner panels mirror one another yet without being copies. But the most remarkable feature is the way in which the forms of vegetation imitate the calligraphy on the panel on the extreme right. The work thus shows that which is said in the inscription: that the incorporation of calligraphy into painting is the quintessence of Chinese art.



Xu Wei (1521–93),
Grapes



Xu Wei, *Fish and Crab*





32. The Flower Stream 花溪

2015, ink on paper, 239 x 69 cm

Water appears in Cao Jun's art in several ways, not only as an accompaniment of mountains in landscape paintings. In *The Flower Stream* the water is depicted as a source and medium of life. The lotuses and other vegetative forms are attached to long stems that have grown out of the water where the lily pads are floating. If one imagined seeing here the shapes of animals, one would fully recognize how water sustains life. The one unmistakably animate form is the fish swimming near the surface of the stream. Cao Jun's depiction of the fish could be taken to display water as the proper medium of fish—that is, as a remote translation of the words of the ancient Taoist philosopher Zhuangzi: "Do you see how the fish are coming to the surface and swimming around as they please? That's what fish really enjoy." Cao Jun's depiction of fish also recalls the ancient Chinese tradition of painting fish, often with flowers. The way he combines forms typical of ancient Chinese painting with abstract, undecidable forms shows how paintings such as *The Flower Stream* represent a fusion of traditional Chinese painting and modern Western painting analogous to that achieved in the landscape paintings.

33. A Cool Breeze with the Fragrance of Flowers 花气杂风凉

2008, ink and watercolor on paper, 274 x 69 cm



34. Scenic World 湘云楚水

2007, ink and watercolor on paper, 274 x 69 cm

For Cao Jun sketching from nature is a vital step in his process, one rooted in traditional Chinese painting. On the one side, this relies on feeling; otherwise the work becomes a mere record of objective reality. Cao Jun attests that it is through feeling as it animates sketching from nature that the artist can form a distinctive style. On the other side, sketching from nature can endow an artist with motivation and creative passion. In this pair of large, yet delicate paintings, the practice of sketching from nature and all the moments connected to it seems not very far removed. While they represent natural elements (clouds [Scenic World's literal title is *Clouds and Waters in Chu and Xiang Area*], waters, wind), they do so delicately by virtue of the association with flowers, flowery fragrances, and a gentle scene. And yet, it is as if the ink-splash forms served to cover up the ferocity of which the elements are capable.

The inscriptions say only that these works were executed in 2008 and summer 2007, respectively, both in New Zealand.



LOTUS SERIES

Each painting in this series has the lotus as its principal theme. Cao Jun prefers to paint the lotus, above all other flowers. Yet, as these five paintings demonstrate, the lotuses are depicted in various configurations, and, most significantly, each painting presents a particular scene (of beauty, of nightfall, for instance) and thereby evokes a feeling attuned to the scene (such as wonder or despair).

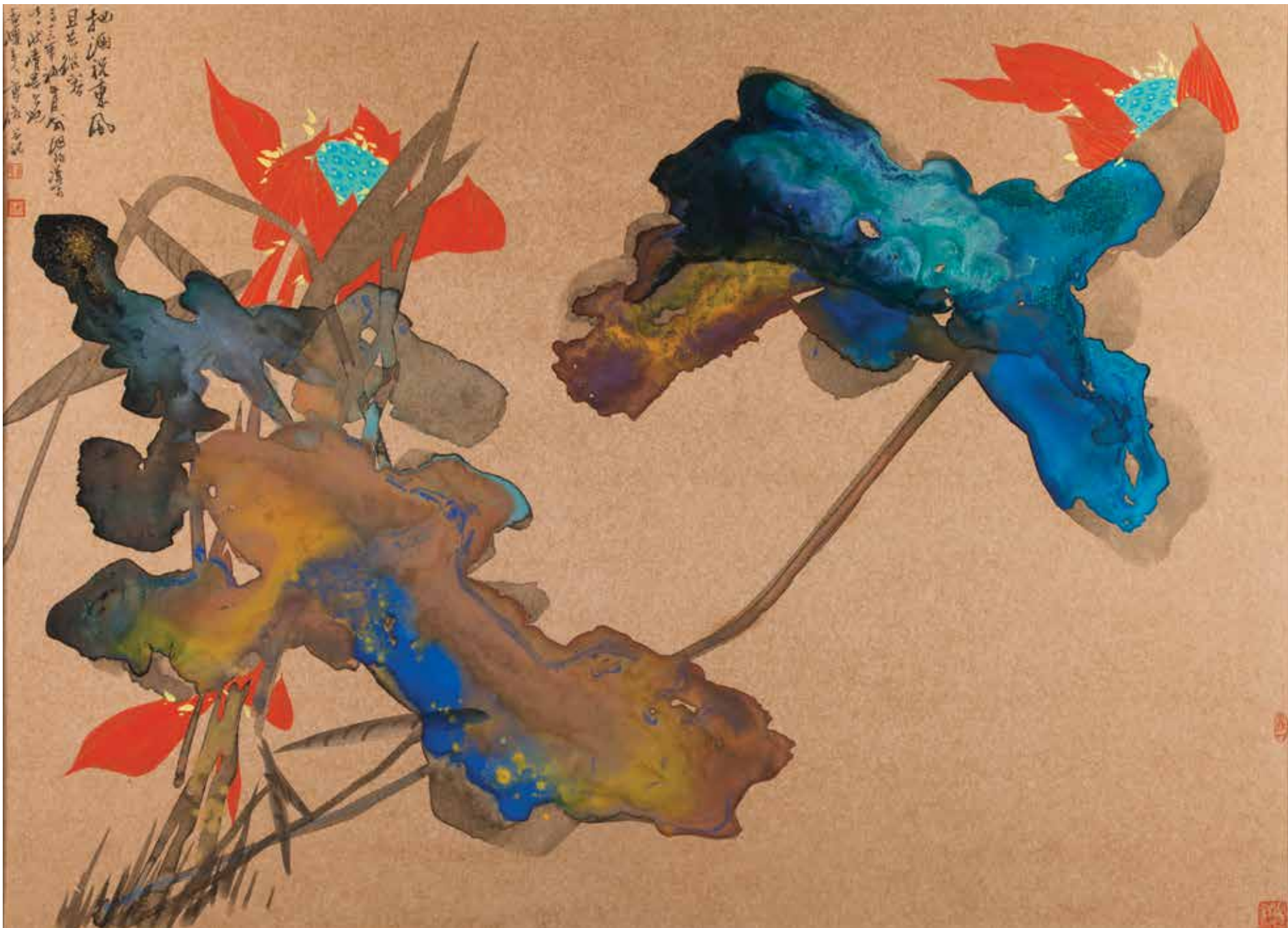
Cao Jun tells a story that reveals how such paintings—if not paintings in general—are produced. “Several days ago I went fishing at Taupo Lake for a whole night. Everything seemed swallowed up in the blackness of darkness, except for some lights beside the lake. It felt terrible at first, but later on I got used to the environment. I was embraced by a kind of mysteriousness as well as magical beauty, which was unlikely to be revealed through sketching, for there was nothing at all to be depicted. Everything is lively in daytime, such as swans, wild ducks, trees, and forests at the shoreline and snow-peaked mountains in the distance. Nevertheless, all of them are erased by the powerful night. Even sages can only add some spots on the pitch-black canvas. However, my feeling told me that nature makes a selection about which part should be adopted and which part should be discarded in order to furnish us with a brand new atmosphere. An artist may encounter the same situation, deciding what to adopt and what to discard during his sketching or creation.”

Among other things, Cao Jun’s story implies that artistic creation is preceded by a certain blindness and that it is from under the cover of darkness that the artist, granted a gift of nature, decides what is to be brought into the light of his painting.

35. Toasting to the Spring Breeze 把酒祝东风

2016, ink and watercolor on paper, mounted on board, 78 x 108 cm

Toasting to the Spring Breeze depicts the initial unfolding of the beauty of the lotuses as daylight comes to illuminate them. To toast to the spring breeze is to welcome the rebirth brought by the arrival of spring; it is to take joy in the passing of winter. The artist's inscription reads: "Toasting to the spring breeze, we stay calm and at ease. Written randomly in New York in early winter of 2016 to express our great aspirations."



36. Wonderful Scenery 清景无限



2016, ink and watercolor on paper, mounted on board, 78 x 108 cm

Wonderful Scenery suggests the emergence of the beautiful lotuses as they are born from the darkness of the ink-splashed forms and come into the light of the painting. Their beauty evokes wonder. The inscription consists of an excerpt from a poem by Su Shi, a poet of the Song dynasty, in which the tradition of decorative, richly colored flower paintings was established. The inscription reads: "Hoar frost dripped down from round lotus leaves, while no one disturbed the silence. But as the drum struck three and a leaf dropped off loudly, my cloudy dream was interrupted. In the vast endless night, there was no way back, as I walked through the tiny garden awake."

37. Hidden Fragrance 暗香



2016, ink and watercolor on paper, mounted on board, 78 x 108 cm

In *Hidden Fragrance* the lotuses remain partly concealed, and a mood of uncertainty may be prompted, uncertainty as to whether the scene is one of flowers blooming with the arrival of spring or flowers receding as summer comes to an end. The latter is suggested by the way the dark form at center right cuts across the stems that nourish the blooms.



38. Aromatic Lotus with Dropping Petals 芳莲坠粉

2016, ink and watercolor on paper, mounted on board, 100 x 50 cm

In *Aromatic Lotus with Dropping Petals*, the scene is still well-illuminated, though the ink-splashed areas now cover much more of the surface than do the lotuses, which have in fact retreated behind the dark areas. Their fragrance remains, and yet the petals are dropping.

39. Reflections of the Bright Moon on Half the Lake's Surface 倒泻半湖明月

2016, ink and watercolor on paper, mounted on board, 50 x 50 cm



In *Reflections of the Bright Moon on Half the Lake's Surface*, night has fallen, though it is not the powerful night that swallows up everything. For the moon is bright enough to cast its reflection on the portion of the lake that is partially obscured by the ink-splashed form. Nonetheless, the entire scene has darkened, and the light is too dim to let the brilliant red of the single remaining lotus appear. There is only the hope faintly suggested by the small bud.

REFLECTIONS OF AUTUMN

Autumn is the season for celebrating the bounty of nature. It is a time when nature is aglow, and this radiance is reflected in the things of nature, animate beings, vegetative life, water, moonlight. These paintings let autumn be reflected in these living things and these elements of nature. There are also hints, especially in the inscriptions, about the celebrations in which humans engage during this season.

秋入云山
物色皆含
清景
白雲
知處
鳥鳴
風動
水清
月明
人靜
此景
此情
此意
此心
此境
此情
此意
此心
此境

40. Autumn Reflected in Cloud-Enshrouded Mountains 秋入云山

2015, ink on paper, 239 x 69 cm

In this painting no mountains are depicted. Even if they were, it is entirely unclear how autumn or its reflection would look. What the picture shows is simply reflection as such, that is, two ink-splashed shapes that are similar enough that one might be supposed to be the reflection of the other. Yet, it is an imperfect reflection, for the two shapes are not identical. Moreover, the lower shape is shown to be the reflected one by its proximity to the fish; and yet, it is more intense than the shape it reflects.

The lengthy inscription tells of nature and celebration. It consists of a poem, by Zhang Lun of the Song dynasty, which has the same title as this painting. In the first part, the poem describes the scenic disposition of all the things of nature as autumn arrives and is reflected in the mountains. The second part concerns a mid-autumn festival, during which the poet sits in the moonlight and enjoys the time while chatting with a farmer from the mountainous area.

41. The Pure Autumn

净秋

2015, ink on paper, 239 x 69 cm

Signs of autumn are apparent in this painting. There is a large, fully opened flower, and there are stalks of mature wheat ready for the harvest. Except possibly for the wheat, all the other vegetative forms are growing from pads in the water. These pads serve to mark the surface of the water, below which a single fish is swimming. With this animate creature Cao Jun sets movement into the painting: the depiction lets the movement of the fish be seen in and through the still plants.

The inscription is an adaptation of a poem by Huang Tingjian from the Song dynasty. Under a moonlit autumn night with a clear sky, the protagonist is feasting with a group of friends and writing a poem spontaneously, while the sound of a flute is borne by the wind. The poem presents a time of celebration, a time for feasting, for writing poetry, and for being entranced by music.



42. The Autumn Moon Hanging above a Pond 半塘悬秋月

2015, ink on paper, 70 x 47 cm

In this painting the entire scene appears to be under water. As in Cao Jun's other paintings that are reflections of autumn, here there are animate creatures, no longer a fish but now a crab as well as another animal that looks vaguely like a turtle. The title suggests that the theme of the painting is the autumn moon; in hanging above a pond, it is, no doubt, reflected on the surface of the pond. Most remarkably, however, neither the moon nor its reflection on the water appear in the picture. The space where they would be seen, the space from the surface upward, is filled instead with calligraphy inscribing the title of the painting.

半塘悬秋月
曹俊



DREAMS OF SPACE

The paintings in this series are the most colorful in the entire exhibition. Yet, in contrast to most others, they bear no inscriptions that might provide clues pointing to the sense of the paintings and supplying some basis for interpretation. With these works one must rely on what is seen in the image itself, the title, and a few remarks offered by the artist.

But what about the titles of Cao Jun's paintings? How are they related to the paintings themselves? In this connection Cao Jun has written about the stages and methods by which he produces his works. He says: "First of all, I produce the main part with traditional brush and ink as well as with modern methods of composition. Then I do color-splashing, gold-splashing, and gold-sprinkling according to the subject, along with diverse methods in the details." He goes on to describe several methods by which he combines application of ink and color painting. Then he concludes: "At last, I come up with a proper title."

Thus, the title does not enter into the production of a painting, neither as expressing in advance its theme nor as emerging in its process of production. It comes only at the end, only after the painting has been completed. But then, this means that the title is descriptive of the actual work, that it is formulated in view of the completed work. It is for this reason that the titles of Cao Jun's paintings provide reliable hints concerning their meaning.

43. Seeking Dream Space 寻梦空间

2012, mixed media on canvas, 65 x 680 cm

This enormous painting has a history like no other. In 2014 the Chinese government set out to celebrate the recent artistic achievements of Chinese artists in the broad sense, including poets and composers as well as visual artists. Corresponding to the 1.3 billion people in present-day China, the decision was made to send works by thirteen Chinese artists to the moon; the spacecraft was to circle around the moon and then return to earth. A section of *Seeking Dream Space* was the sole painting to be chosen for this lunar voyage.

The work as a whole is like a dream and is to be experienced as if it were a dream. Like a dream, it keeps going on and on, and one is borne along from image to image. As in a dream, the images are largely disconnected; they do not form a sequence or pattern as in a narrative or in the representation of a scene. One image dissolves into another or mutates into a different shape. The space of the dream continues to open upon definite or indefinite images of all things. The painting enacts a dream of the universe. Clearly no other work by Cao Jun

would have been quite so appropriate for the voyage to the moon.

Cao Jun regards the painting as a representation of the entire universe. It presents the universe as it would be revealed in a dream. He explains, furthermore, that if you slice out any section of the painting, that section also represents the universe. Thus, the segment sent to the moon was not a mere fragment, but rather a surrogate for the entire painting.

A fish is depicted here as it glides through the water, which in most of the painting is indicated by a deep shade of blue. Fish appear in many of Cao Jun's paintings and are usually represented as capable of swimming with minimal movement of their fins.



Most of the images in this segment of the painting are barely, if at all, recognizable. Yet, with some imagination, one can envision various things in them, such as dogs, other animal faces, and various aquatic creatures.

The peacock depicted here is easily recognizable by its multi-colored tail feathers. Cao Jun says that he reveres the peacock as the most beautiful animal. He explains: "In the tail feathers of the peacock can be found all the colors of the universe." For him the peacock symbolizes the elements of nature. He says that he is inspired by the peacock, because its colors are an expression of the universe.

This leaf is one of the most clearly represented objects in the entire painting. Cao Jun provided the context for this image. He references a Chinese saying about the changing of the seasons: “We know it is fall from just one leaf on the ground.” Then he adds: “This one leaf is a universe in itself; from this one leaf we can think about the whole earth and therefore the whole universe.”

This circular form is much less thickly painted than the glacier image. Cao Jun hints that this might be taken as an image of the moon. Note that half of it extends beyond the top edge of the painting; so if it is indeed a lunar image, it is the image of a half-moon. Cao Jun mentions in this connection that in Chinese culture and literature dreams are always associated with the moon.



According to Cao Jun, this white, thickly painted circular form represents a glacier. To its left there is a stream of blue, representing the sea, which is partially covered by a white haze and in which there are white dots representing fragments of the glacier that have broken off. The melt flows like a river with its bends and forks.

Cao Jun offers a recollection of his experience of seeing a glacier. His narrative is as follows. The first time he saw a glacier was in Chile. He then waited with great expectation to see glaciers again, and when he finally did during a trip to Antarctica, he was at first excited to see large chunks of glaciers splash into and melt into the surrounding ocean waters. Yet soon after this moment of fleeting happiness, a solemn sadness set in because he learned and understood that some chunks of glaciers that were falling off were large enough to supply the world with water for two years. While this painting (*Seeking Dream Space*) celebrates the beauty of nature, it also reminds us of the many senses of tragedy bound up with the realities and effects of global warming. The propensity of humankind to destroy the best of nature surrounding it is a tragedy in and of itself. Witnessing the adverse effects on these glaciers, he felt overwhelmed with a desire to capture and preserve this beauty, which could disappear at any moment. Remarkably, Cao Jun’s feeling of being overwhelmed in so many senses of the word is palpable to the viewer. Indeed, the painting itself is overwhelming.

Cao Jun speaks often of the impact that music has had on his painting. This is especially the case with *Seeking Dream Space*. He suggests even that, despite being a painter, he reveres music as the highest form of art. Because the dream in *Seeking Dream Space* unfolds rhythmically, the painting is not only about space but also about time. This rhythm is what, above all, makes it a musical work.

44. Colorful Time 溢彩流金的岁月

2012, mixed media on canvas, 100 x 150 cm

Repeatedly Cao Jun stresses that it is essential for the artist to observe nature and to gather the source material of his art by sketching from nature. By such sketching the painter gradually gains the confidence to depict the elements of nature with freedom of expression. In this connection Cao Jun writes: "The painting process is actually the process of rebuilding time and space, as well as discerning images of nature, which requires an artist to inject the beauty and strength that he finds in nature into his painting." Yet, the artist does so under the guidance of what his extraordinary vision lets him see. In Cao Jun's words: "Artists need to paint what they 'see' through the mind rather than what they see with their eyes." Cao Jun mentions Van Gogh as a paradigm of one whose painting was governed by his vision of nature. He writes: "Van Gogh had his solitary

dreams among the stars; he saw the agitated rotation of blue and white, as well as the dark trees under the sky."

In *Colorful Time* Cao Jun transposes a vision in which time and space are rebuilt. It is a vision of them as they define a unique kind of movement. In the upper part of the painting, there is a white area that closely resembles a cloud. The movement of clouds is one of the most elemental movements we witness, and in its own way this movement measures out time. Below the cloud is an array of colors, of virtually all colors. Once these components are recognized, Cao Jun's description of what the painting depicts is clear. He has explained it thus: "With time, as time passes, the cloud moves upward and exposes all the colors, letting them expand into the space opened up."



Vincent van Gogh (1853–90), *The Olive Trees*, 1889



45. Pulsating Space 脉动空间

2012, mixed media on canvas, 145 x 84 cm

Pulsating Space embodies an extraordinary vision. It is a painting in which, from a unique perspective, nature is given free expression. According to Cao Jun the painting's vantage point is from high above, of one who observes the terrestrial surface from somewhere in space. From this perspective some things can be discerned, the blue of the sea, especially in the lower left, and the red splotches in the sea depicting islands. Yet, the painting is not only a vision of space but also of time. For the entire spectacle that is seen from space is also pulsating, that is, constantly expanding and contracting. This rhythm, this temporality, would continually alter the configuration of colors in much the same manner as when one rotates a kaleidoscope.



46. Nirvana of Phoenix 涅槃

2013, mixed media on canvas, 85 x 145 cm

This is one of the most astonishingly colorful works in the entire exhibition. Whereas there are many ways in which Cao Jun takes over traditional forms, most notably in landscape painting and in flower painting, he breaks with traditional Chinese practice as regards color. He says that “color is considered a scourge by Chinese artists, who are afraid of the vulgar outcome if color is adopted.” But, he confesses: “Usually I am touched by color, just as children are, which makes me stay awake the whole night.” He observes also that for most people color evokes feeling.

Nirvana of Phoenix follows closely what is indicated in the title. Cao Jun has explained that the dark area in the lower right represents the earth. High above it, having risen high above it, is the phoenix, reborn into a new life in which the one reborn is elevated to nirvana and leaves the earth behind.



47. Boundless 无际

2013, mixed media on canvas, 244 x 90 cm

Cao Jun writes: “Art is an admixture of all the beautiful things deep in the human soul.” In order to gather these profound feelings, the artist “needs to be equipped with music, literature, and poetry.” Painting is not isolated from the other arts but requires a certain engagement in them. Such engagement on the part of Cao Jun is shown by the musicality of many of his paintings and by the poetic inscriptions on them. Each of these arts aims in its own way at expressing our most deeply rooted feelings. One of the most intense and wide-ranging feelings consists in the desire not to be constrained by the earthbound condition common to all humans. It is the desire for boundless existence.

In this painting there is depicted a boundlessness that mirrors in nature the transcendence at which human desire aims. Cao Jun has explained that the entire area in the lower part of the painting freely depicts the earth. Out of the earth its gifts are streaming upward like a boundless natural fountain. Cao Jun leaves open the question as to just what these gifts are, but he hints that they are water and/or wine.



48. River of Stars Crossing Time and Space 穿越时空的星河

2016, mixed media on canvas, 162 x 330 cm

This painting is a powerful depiction of the rebuilding of space and time. It portrays the most primordial kind of cosmic event that can be conceived or imagined. It displays both disruption across the enormous expanse of space-time and the formative power that belongs to the cosmos. It is this power that brings about a rebuilding of space and time, a reconfiguration of them as the universe expands and contracts for a moment of creation. Cao Jun describes the painting in these words: Everything in the universe is coming together to form something new such as a planet. The center of the entire spectacle has the look of distant galaxies seen through a powerful telescope. The bright red and yellow in the upper right are suggestive of the violent explosions and the release of intense energy that characterize most cosmic transformations.



49. The Red Peak 红顶

2016, mixed media on canvas, 92 x 130 cm

Cao Jun writes that “Paintings tend to be divided into two categories: representational ones and abstract ones.” His view is that representational painting presents images, while abstract painting presents symbols. He believes that many painters take these two types to be entirely separated. He continues his explanation: “A great painting is much more than the merely representational kind and than just the abstract kind. It is a combination of these two ingredients, image and symbol, yet what makes the difference is the proportion.”

The Red Peak is a prime example of a painting in which representation and abstraction, image and symbol, are artfully brought together. Cao Jun identifies the painting as presenting a vol-

cano. If, along with the flowing red lava, one notices also the silhouette of the mountain in the upper left, then the appearance seems like an image representing a mountain. On the other hand, the separation between the bright red areas tends to render the painting abstract, only a symbolic presentation of a volcanic mountain.



50. The River of Melody 旋律之河

2016, mixed media on canvas, 103 x 160 cm

Both the title and some areas of this painting are indicative of Cao Jun's view of the relation of painting to music. He writes that "abstract color is quite similar to music." It is this connection that gives Cao Jun's painting a certain affinity with Kandinsky's: painting that is to some degree abstract is like music in that it presents no object. In discussing *The River of Melody*, Cao Jun calls attention to the lattice form and intertwining lines at the upper edge of the painting. He emphasizes that the form and the lines are associated with music. Indeed, the lattice form resembles a staff,

while the lines can be regarded as intertwining voices or musical phrases, as in polyphony. Opposite the symbolic music is a very dark area that runs diagonally just above the brownish orange fading into a grayish white in the lower right corner. Cao Jun describes this as a river coming up out of the earth. It is presumably the mutual affinity of these—for instance, of the flow of music with that of the river—that is presented in the painting.



51. Blazing Heart 炽热之心

2017, mixed media on canvas, 134.6 x 114.3 cm

Cao Jun writes that “an artist can strike a responsive chord in the hearts of his viewers if he touches them with his painting.” He defends his use of color on the ground that it strikes resonances in the heart. The blazing colors of this painting demonstrate how thoroughly Cao Jun has departed from the practice of most traditional Chinese artists. Cao Jun confesses that like a child he is profoundly touched by color. When he paints a landscape, there is—he says—a delight and a wonder that well up from his heart. *Blazing Heart* depicts the heart of the artist as it is fired with creative passion and feeling. Its intensity and compass are so great that it extends across the entire length of the painting. Yet, the colors in the lower right serve as a reminder that all that the fire in the heart of the artist can create remains rooted in the earth.



52. Where I Am From 我从哪里来

2017, mixed media on canvas, 134.6 x 114.3 cm



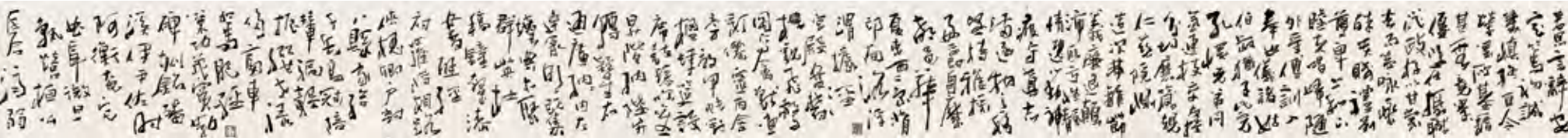
Nothing that an artist might venture is more difficult than to paint an origin, especially if it is the origin of oneself. For this origin is withdrawn into an invisible past. But the task of making the origin visible ceases to be unthinkable if the “I” in the title is the artist himself, if it is Cao Jun as artist who speaks in the first person in the title of this painting. For then it is a question of the place from which he has come to be an artist. What *Where I Am From* thus makes visible as this origin is the earth, its color covering more than half of the surface of the work, its richness displayed by the gold sprinkled on it. There are indeed forms within, there are forms above it, there is an expanse of sky; but it is to the earth that all these are oriented. Where am I from?—asks the artist—and he answers: From the earth. What above all lets the artist become an artist is his attachment to the earth.

CALLIGRAPHY

In the history of Chinese art, there has always been a close relation between painting and calligraphy. In the way that painting requires a certain manipulation of the brush, it shares an essential feature with calligraphy. Cao Jun explains that through the influence of calligraphy, the line became indispensable for Chinese painting. He says that it is incumbent upon contemporary Chinese artists to endow the line with a new spirit attuned to the contemporary world. Cao Jun writes that “being a calligrapher lays the foundation for being an artist, that calligraphy is the basis for Chinese painting.” Without qualification, he states that “Chinese calligraphy is one of the highest forms of human art.”

53. Thousand Character Classic 千字文

2011, ink on paper, 34 x 1520 cm



This text (*Ch'ien Tzu Wen*) is a canonical primer used for several centuries for teaching Chinese characters to children. It was written by Chou Hsing-szu between 507 and 521 CE. In it a list of a thousand characters were organized in a coherent and rhymed form in order to make learning easier and more interesting. It has often been used as a suitable text by which calligraphers could display their skill.

The first thirty-six lines may be translated:

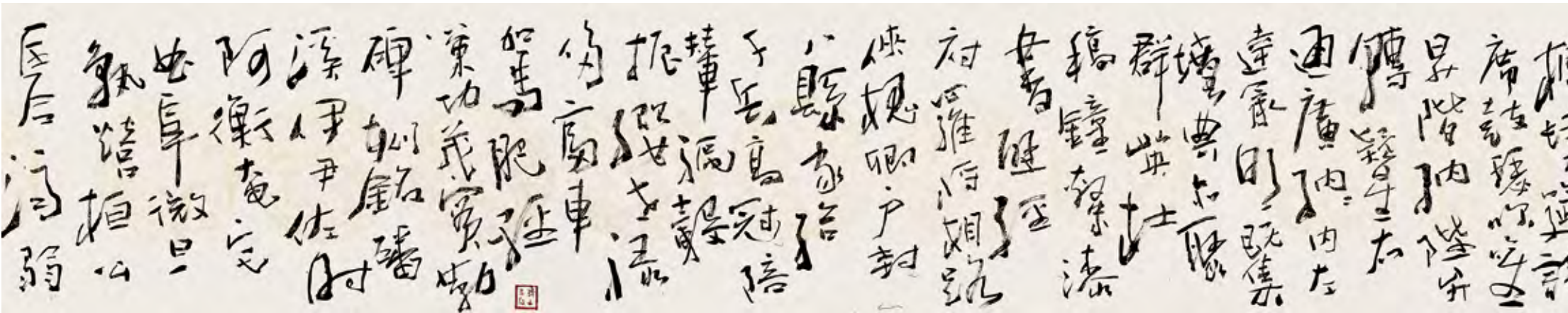
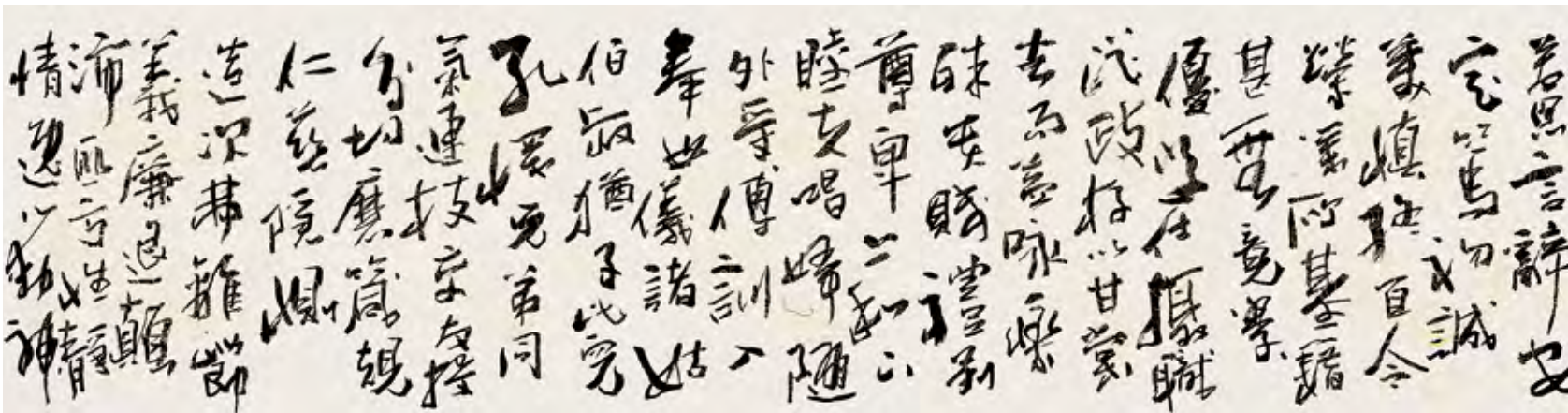
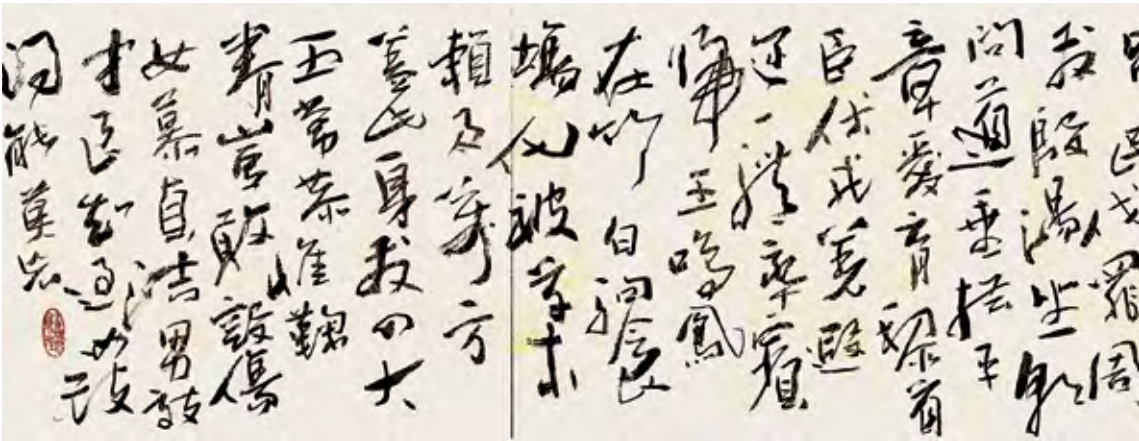
The sky was black and the earth was yellow,
The universe was vast and a dark whole.
The sun rises and sets and the moon alternates
between round and eclipse,
Stars spread high above without a toll.

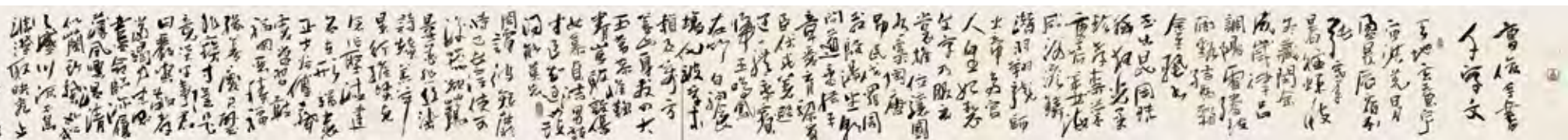
Cold and heat come and go,
Fall harvest and storing for winter people
know.
Intercalary days and months are fixed to make
a year,

When clouds rise and meet cold, there will
soon be a rain,
When dew drops congeal, they become frost
in the main.

Gold is found in the Li River,
Jade is found in the Kunlun Mountains.
The best-known sword is called Ju Que,
The most famous pearl is known as Ye Guang.

Plum and a certain kind of apple are among
best fruits,





Important vegetables include mustard and
ginger.
Sea water is salty while river water is fresh,
Fishes swim in water while birds fly in the air.

Longshi, Huodi, Niaoguan, and Renhuang, as
legend goes,
Were celebrities of China's remote ages.
Cang Jie created Chinese characters,
And some other people began to make clothes.

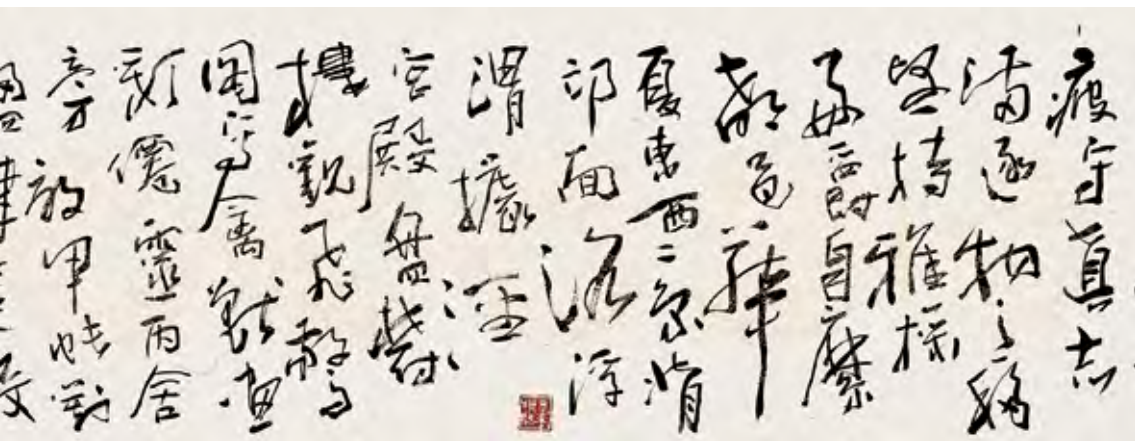
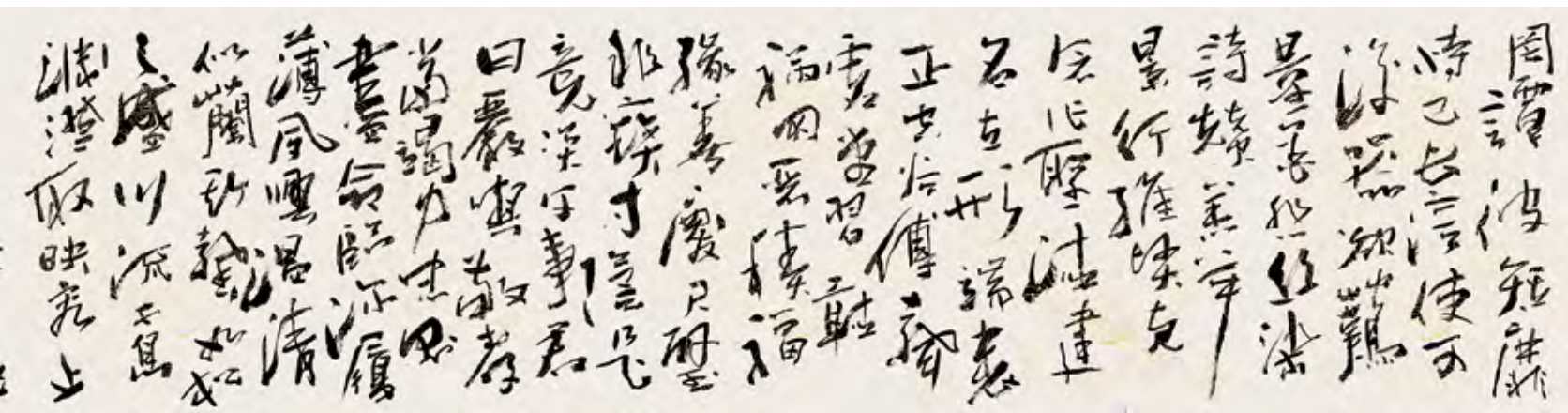
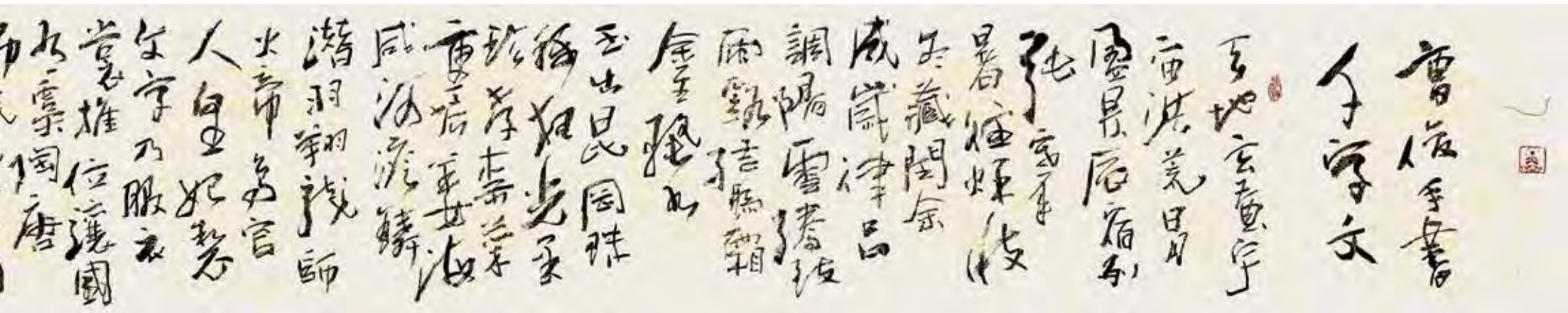
Good emperors Yao and Shun

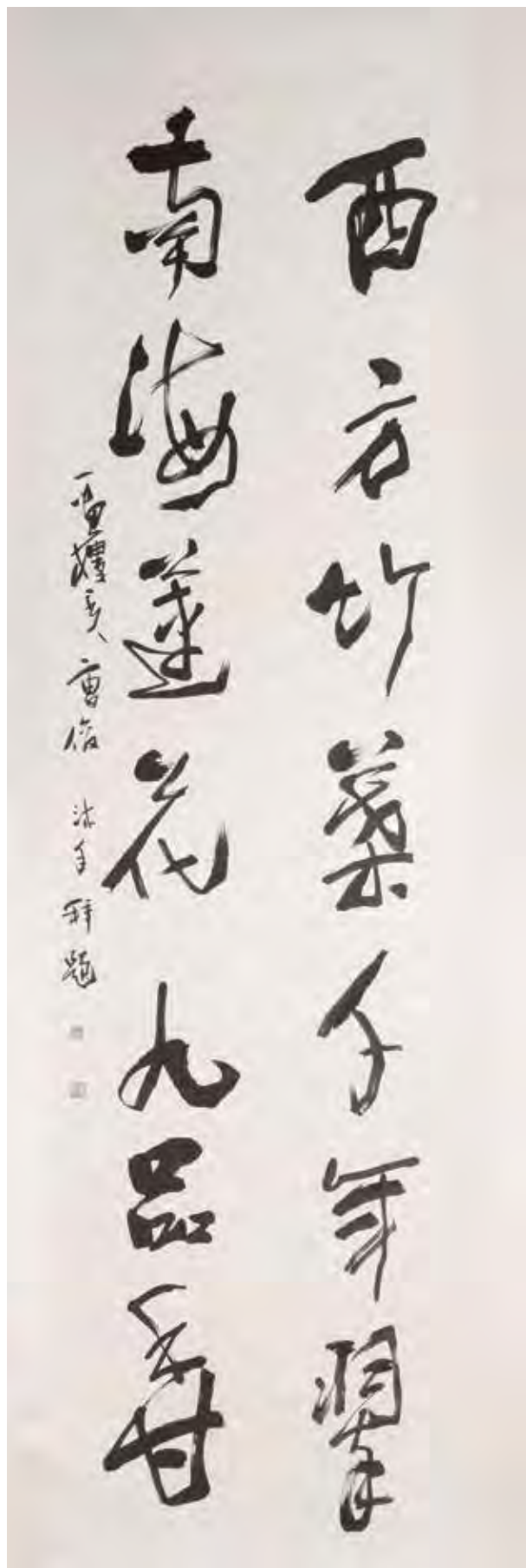
Abdicated willingly,
The Zhou dynasty's Wu and the Shang dynas-
ty's Tang
Were the emperors who loved common people
and punished criminals severely.

A wise emperor often consulted his good offi-
cials to administer his empire,
And the empire was governed in peace.
He loved his subjects and tended the multi-
tude,

The minority nationalities like Rong and Qiang
could be ruled with ease.
Places far and near come to be under one ruler,
All the people voluntarily submitted to the
authority of the emperor.

Phoenixes are singing merrily among bamboos,
White colts are grazing on grassland.
The grace of a virtuous monarch will nourish
the grass and trees,
And benefit the whole land.





54. Western Bamboo Leaf 西方竹叶

2015, ink on paper,
230 x 68 cm

Translation:

Bamboo leaves in the West are green like emerald for a thousand years;
Lotuses in the South Sea have the fragrance of the ninth class [idiomatic usage].

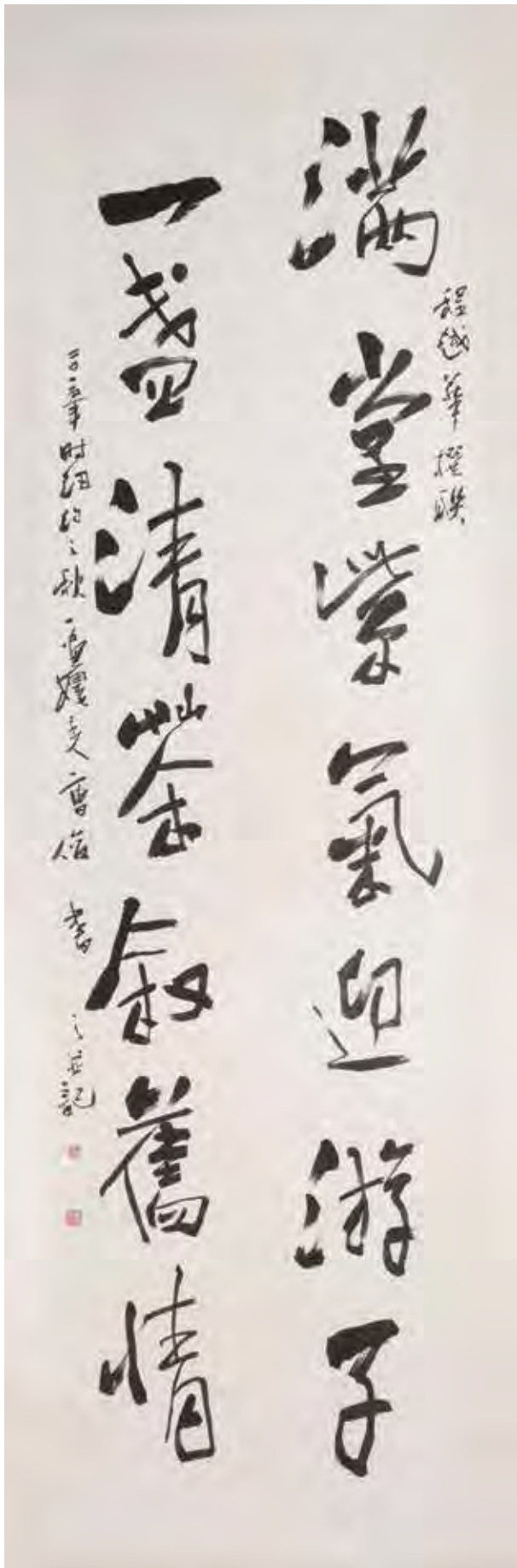
55. Real Heart 真心自在

2015, ink on paper,
218 x 68 cm

Translation:

A truthful and free heart can act fearlessly;
Ingenious laws with sympathetic measures are flexible and far-reaching.





56. Purple Air Filling the Whole House 满堂紫气

2015, ink on paper, 239 x 69 cm

Translation:

The whole house's purple air welcomes the
wandering son;
Recollecting friendship of the past at a cup of
light tea.

Written by Cheng Yuehua [a poet from Cao
Jun's hometown]. Autumn 2015.

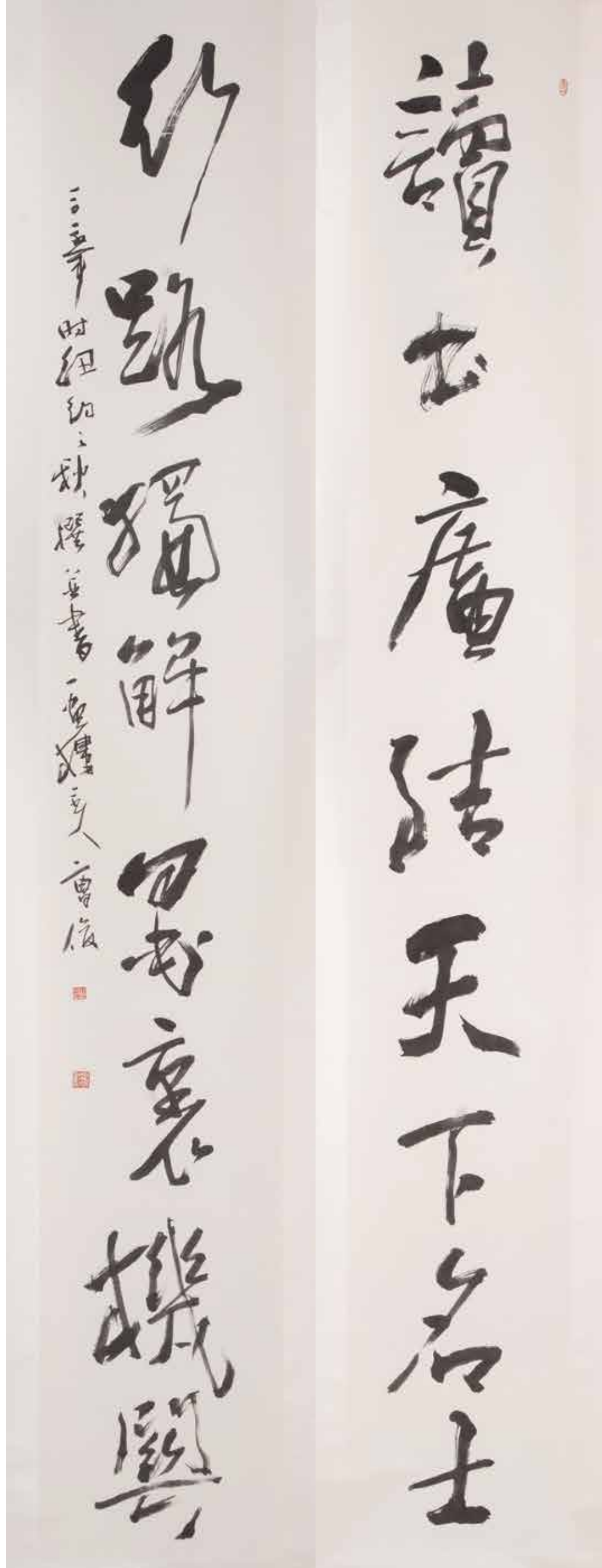
57. The Secret of Ink 墨里机关

2015, ink on paper, 239 x 69 cm

Translation:

By reading I become friends with prominent
figures from all over the world;
By traveling I gain insight into the secret of
ink.

Written in autumn 2015, New York.



PORCELAIN

58. A Pond with the Fragrance of Lotus 一塘荷气

2010, blue and white porcelain,
57.2 x 38.7 (diam.) cm



59. A Pond of Lotus 一塘荷气

2010, blue and white porcelain, 33.8 x 26.7 (diam.) cm



60. Art Is Different Because of Me

艺因我不同

2010, blue and white porcelain, 53.7 x 22.9 (diam.) cm



61. Little Tiger Comes into the World 小虎出山

2010, blue and white porcelain, 55.4 x 38.7 (diam.) cm



62. Meiping Vase 梅瓶

2010, blue and white porcelain, 60 x 29.5 (diam.) cm



63. Apple-Shaped Vase 苹果尊

2010, blue and white porcelain, 37.1 x 50.2 (diam.) cm



SONGS OF THE EARTH

In Cao Jun's painting there are many songs of the earth, songs that give voice, above all, to the mountains as they tower upward from earth to sky. His paintings sing of the massive stones, the clusters of trees, the surrounding waters, of all that belongs to the mountains. They sing of the mist, haze, fog, and clouds that spread across the earth, that obscure the lofty peaks of the mountains. They sing of the streams, which ancient Chinese painters called "the arteries of a mountain," and of the cascading waters that fill the lakes and rivers surrounding the mountain. They sing of the vast sky as it arches over the earth. They sing of the sweet fragrance of the lotus and of the gentle breeze that conveys the fragrance. They sing of the boundless fecundity of the earth. In all these songs the wonders of the earth are granted an unheard-of visibility.

64. Breath of the Earth 地球的呼吸

Cao Jun and Steven Rockefeller Jr., 2017, mixed media on glass and video, 82 x 138.7 cm



Cao Jun and Steven Rockefeller Jr. collaborated in producing this double-layered work. The upper layer is a painting on glass by Cao Jun. The glass is laid on top of a video taken by Steven Rockefeller Jr. in the Bahamas. The video shows the ocean splashing against the rocks and can be seen through the blank spaces on the surface of the painting.

According to Cao Jun the work is meant to express the wonder and amazement that the earth can evoke. Cao Jun reports that his painting is a scene of the earth observed from the sky. Together with the video, its purpose is to make visible the play of light, seen in the form of the very bright spots in the painting, and wave patterns of the sea. Through these depictions the earth's breath and soul—as Cao

Jun designates them—are to be disclosed. This work, encompassing the entire space between earth and sky, is meant to issue a call to humanity to think of the earth as a living being and to accept the responsibility to protect it. The work is a hymn in celebration of the earth.

Contributors

Bret W. Davis is professor of philosophy at Loyola University Maryland. In addition to attaining a PhD in philosophy at Vanderbilt University, he has spent more than a dozen years studying and teaching as well as practicing Zen in Japan. He has published more than sixty articles in English and Japanese on Continental, East Asian, and comparative philosophy; his authored and edited books include: *Japanese Philosophy in the World* (in Japanese, 2005); *Heidegger and the Will: On the Way to "Gelassenheit"* (2007); *Japanese and Continental Philosophy: Conversations with the Kyoto School* (2011); and *Engaging Dōgen's Zen: The Philosophy of Practice as Awakening* (2017). He has translated works from Japanese and German, and he co-edits (with Alejandro A. Vallega and D. A. Masolo) Indiana University Press's series in World Philosophies. He is currently completing work on *The Oxford Handbook of Japanese Philosophy*.

John Sallis is Frederick J. Adelmann, SJ Professor of Philosophy at Boston College. He is the author of more than twenty-five books. Among his more recent publications are: *Logic of Imagination* (2012); *The Philosophical Vision of Paul Klee* (2014); *Light Traces* (2014, illustrated by Alejandro A. Vallega); *Klee's Mirror* (2015); *Senses of Landscape* (2015); *The Return of Nature: On the Beyond of Sense* (2016); *The Figure of Nature: On Greek Origins* (2016); and *Plato's "Statesman": Dialectic, Myth, and Politics* (editor, 2017). Sallis curated *Paul Klee: Philosophical Vision; From Nature to Art* (2012) at the McMullen Museum and edited its accompanying catalogue. He has held numerous fellowships and in 2006 received an honorary doctorate from Universität Freiburg. He is a regular visiting professor at Staffordshire University and at Universität Freiburg.

Alejandro A. Vallega is associate professor of philosophy at the University of Oregon. He is the author of *Heidegger and the Issue of Space: Thinking on Exilic Grounds* (2003); *Sense and Finitude: Encounters at the Limits of Art, Language, and the Political* (2009); and *Latin American Philosophy from Identity to Radical Exteriority* (2014). Vallega contributed to the catalogue for the McMullen's exhibition *Paul Klee: Philosophical Vision; From Nature to Art* (2012). He is co-editor (with Bret W. Davis and D. A. Masolo) for the World Philosophies series published by Indiana University Press. His work focuses on aesthetics, Latin American philosophy, and decolonial thought. Before beginning his career in philosophy, Vallega was formally trained as a painter at the BFA program of the Massachusetts College of Art and Design and has continued to work privately, keeping studios in Oregon and Italy. His paintings and drawings illustrate John Sallis's *Light Traces* (2014).

Wang Huaiyu is associate professor of philosophy at Georgia College & State University and the former president of the Association of Chinese Philosophers in America. Wang has published numerous articles on comparative and Continental philosophy. His recent works, focusing on early Confucian teachings and their modern significance, have appeared in *Philosophy East and West* and *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*. His current book project explores the meanings and origins of art and ritual and their importance for moral life, with the tentative title *The Refinement of Ritual and the Heart of Confucian Ethics*.

Xia Kejun is a philosopher, critic, and curator. He received his PhD in philosophy from Wuhan University and has held fellowships for postdoctoral studies at Universität Freiburg and Université de Strasbourg. He has been on the faculty of the School of Liberal Arts at Renmin University in Beijing since 2007. Xia has published more than ten books, including *The Poetry of Posture* (2011); *Infra-Mince: Duchamp and Zhuangzi* (2011); *The Pleasure of Graphic Writing* (2012); *The Body* (2013); and *An Awaiting and Unusable People: Zhuangzi and the Second Turning of Heidegger* (2017). In his philosophical writings he has sought a new path for Chinese philosophy through his development of the concept of rest or of remains. In his studies of contemporary Chinese art he has proposed the concepts of non-dimensionality, enchorial-topia, and infra-mince. Xia has curated many exhibitions of contemporary art in China, Hong Kong, and Europe.

Yang Guang is associate research fellow in the department of philosophy at Tongji University, Shanghai. He received a bachelor's degree in literature at Nankai University and master's and doctoral degrees in philosophy from Universität Freiburg. Yang's areas of current research include Greek philosophy, phenomenology, comparative philosophy, and aesthetics. His work has been published in German, English, and Chinese.





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