

## SENTIENCE – The art of Tony NG Kwun-lun

Turn on the TV or tune in to whatever audio/visual medium is beckoning and it's as natural as getting out of bed. Putting on the news is like putting on your shoes; we don't even think about it. We immerse ourselves naturally into the socially orchestrated world of signs and signifiers, far away from lived experience without a thought. This is a given; common knowledge. We don't withdraw from the synthesised - as though we are *missing* something - we embrace it. We happily tune out our senses when we tune in. You think we are looking and hearing? Sorry, not so. We don't look, we *read* and we don't hear, we *decipher*. Of course we do. Socially, it is up to the brain to *make sense* of what we sense - otherwise sound and sightings would just wash over us like a warm shower. We decode the rabble of media info coming at us through a screen of social signifiers: words, images, signs, symbols and sounds that conceptually stand in for actual events.

*Second Nature* as it is called, belies the fact that there could ever possibly be a *first* nature. It is very easy to overlook the fact that there is something else going on in the world apart from what we have enclosed conceptually. And yet, recognising that "something else" is harder than it may seem. As soon as one tries to finger the actual presence of phenomena independent of us, something that enabled the human presence in the first place (which maintains us still) we extinguish it. As we subject it to the kind of intellectual scrutiny we use to classify everything else, we simultaneously obliterate it. We apply the critical distancing of objectivity in order to better know it, thus eliminating the possibility of any such knowing. The point is that recognition of "nature" - not the human concept but the phenomenon - cannot be recognised intellectually; rather it is sensed. And an important medium that can allow us some insight into this sensed world (and our own sentience) is a particular kind of art.

Tony Ng's paintings offer this possibility. Ng understands art's ability to speak of things that neither he nor anyone else can orchestrate. Further, he understands the difference between *speaking of* the 'phenomenon of existence' (for want of a better phrase) and simply conjuring a representation of landscape, or a narrative about it. What Ng really provides, is what we may call a sentient space, an open visual field which can be experienced, rather than read like a billboard. His paintings require a different approach to the kind of rationalist processing required for TV. How can one create a visual 'image' which bears no relation to the usual avalanche of familiar mass media imagery, an image which also insists on being understood in a totally different way? Perhaps it's to do with motivation. The artist does not assert his *will*, the work is not a self-engrossed *statement* and it does not want to *sell* you anything. Additionally, the medium - paint, pigment, ink etc is not simply the means towards these ends. Instead, in an important way, the medium is also the subject of the work. Rather than the artist 'mastering' the medium, he forms a kind of contractual agreement with it. Ng uses ink, pigment, paper, gravity, evaporation among other things, and in a way, these mediums use him. Together, they form an alliance and the image develops out of this symbiotic relationship. In the end, the work celebrates the phenomena of person interacting in the world of material substances and the forces that direct it - it observes the essential, mutually inclusive relation between body and world.

For the viewer, the prolonged process of looking into Ng's paintings makes one aware of this essential relation. It is embedded in the layers of the work, in the residual evidence of the body's mutual relation to medium. To observe this is an experience not unlike that of scrutinising a chunk of volcanic rock. If we are prepared to look at it - and look hard - we may glimpse, momentarily, something of unimaginable significance, something which our brain's socially constructed responses do not allow us to witness. It is something one may call *flux*. We may sense in the rock that matter is not 'static' and it is not 'solid', it merely exists between continually changing states - as we do. Momentarily, we may

grasp what it is that is beyond our concepts of *time* and *space*. These concepts are the tools we use to dissect experience into workable fragments so that they can be defined, analysed and monitored. Our rationalised world is a conglomerate of these static entities, each isolated from one another with its own name and number. Most of us have long forgotten that in fact everything is seamless, that there is no such thing as a static moment or a static entity operating alongside everything else. Rather, everything is interdependent and is always in constant flux, forever shifting from one stage or state to another. As the philosopher Nishitani says, the flower is merely an incremental stage between seed and dust.

Ng is ideally situated to speak of these things. His Chinese background means he springs from an ancient culture which has for millennia recognised 'inclusiveness' as opposed to objective fragmentation. This is not a 'concept' and it is not a 'belief system'; it stems from a kind of pre-reflective awareness that operates outside of our normal objectifying thought processes. Ng's seems to recognise this condition and through his art he has managed to transcribe it into his own contemporary voice. To do so requires remarkable conviction at a time when many contemporary artists are succumbing to the more glamorous post-popist art idioms, utilising the typical hi-tech mediums and methods we use in our daily lives. At present, many artists emulate the personal neuroses of our dysfunctional society as though they are addressing important cultural issues. These parodies may instead, merely operate as a temporary mask for our despair. But for artists like Tony Ng, who are prepared to avoid the nihilistic slip towards the soup of the everyday, a more enduring art emerges. His engagement with the deeply embedded phenomena of our own sentience - the essential nature of our being that enables us to recognise the relevance of things *not* accessible to our usual synthesised processing - might, in the end, turn out to be the most important cultural issue of all.

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January 1999